INDIAN CINEMA
Today and Tomorrow
INFRASTRUCTURE, AESTHETICS, AUDIENCES

INDIAN CINEMA

Today and Tomorrow

INFRASTRUCTURE, AESTHETICS, AUDIENCES

INDIAN CINEMA

Today and Tomorrow

INFRASTRUCTURE, AESTHETICS, AUDIENCES

INDIAN CINEMA
Today and Tomorrow
INFRASTRUCTURE, AESTHETICS, AUDIENCES

EDITED BY

S. V. SRINIVAS
RATHEESH RADHAKRISHNAN
SUBHAJIT CHATTERJEE
OMITA GOYAL

INDIA
INTERNATIONAL
CENTRE IIC

IIC **WINTER 2020
SPRING 2021**
Quarterly

ISSN NO. 0376-9771

CONTENTS

PHOTO ESSAY

ARTICLES

EDITORIAL

It was forty years ago that the *IIC Quarterly* published a special issue on a similar subject—*Indian Popular Cinema: Myth, Meaning and Metaphor* (guest edited by Pradip Krishen). It was a simple time, one of watching films in movie halls. The choice available was determined by distributors and theatre owners—the latest films in the local language and the occasional Hollywood film. True, around 700 films were produced annually in India and viewed by over 12.5 million people per day. Cinema was a source of recreation and an opportunity to socialise. The film industry provided employment to thousands, yet it was a financially ailing industry. How much has changed in the intervening years!

Developments in the 1990s, including liberalisation, changed this loss-making industry into one that wielded soft power globally and was a financial and economic asset for the country. The political importance of cinema was of course always well known and has continued to evolve and grow. Cinema has been, and is, a powerful tool for social mobilisation. Alongside cinema there has been the exponential growth of television, with content made especially for TV, as well as social media. The last decade has seen such a range of technologies, from the camera phone to the most sophisticated digital equipment; such an avalanche of talent, from trained to completely untrained actors and a volume of content impossible to document and categorise. However, cinema survived it all—the onslaught of home entertainment with changing formats over the years, from TV to satellite, to VCRs and DVDs, serials to OTT streaming platforms.

One must also make a mention of Film Studies, an important, if unanticipated, area that has evolved since the last decades of the 20th century. Film studies is now an accepted academic discipline, one that makes a serious study of films, cinematic history and film culture, one that is informed by film theory. Film studies analyses film content, its form, technique and stylistic elements and socio-political, historical and economic aspects.

FOREWORD

This issue of the *Quarterly*, *Indian Cinema Today and Tomorrow: Infrastructure, Aesthetics, Audiences* attempts to understand where cinema is today. The Covid pandemic has, in the last two years, brought matters to a head for the film industry. The OTT platforms have made the most of this time of lockdowns and restrictions to provide entertainment in unprecedented volumes and a number of languages—original and dubbed. Content similar to full-length films is now being developed for these platforms, with a concomitant demand that it be recognised as such by the Oscars and festivals. What does this herald for the film industry? Is there a future for the industry as we knew it?

In the words of the guest editors, 'Do the pandemic, and serial lockdowns which began in March 2020 mark a clean break with the pasts of cinema? Or is it more like the interval in our films, which heightens the drama but eventually leads us to predictable endings?'

The pandemic continues to dominate our lives in so many ways. There has been some respite recently but even the experts do not know how long it will last and what awaits us after that.

OMITA GOYAL

◆

In our cultural life films have played a significant role over the last century. I am not a serious student of the cinema, so I will begin with my own personal experience over the decades. I recall seeing the earlier mythological films—*Ram Rajya*, *Bharat Milap* and *Shakuntala*—in the early 1940s. Since then many significant and memorable films have been made. *Do Bigha Zameen*, with Balraj Sahni and Nirupama Roy, was a major statement against the cruel exploitation of poor farmers by ruthless capitalists. Then there was a genre of patriotic films by Manoj Kumar and others; then again there were human interest stories such as *Bandini*, *Pyaasa* and *Dosti*. Again, we come to a historical masterpiece like *Mughal-e-Azam* with steller performances by Prithviraj Kapoor, Dilip Kumar and Madhubala. With changing socio-economic conditions, the content of our cinema has also changed and an alternate cinema emerged in 1970, to be followed by 'New Cinema'.

This volume has brought together a number of thoughtful essays on the various aspects of Indian cinema. In particular, the assertion of woman power is significant in that the endemic mistreatment of women is no longer acceptable and has to be opposed boldly at all levels. Also, the growing acceptance of alternate sexuality is at last beginning to feature, although still rather tentatively, in our cinema. Another trend is the dubbing of south Indian films into Hindi, which has brought a new flavour into Bollywood.

I have two personal remarks to make which, although not directly connected with these essays, nonetheless deserve some attention. The first is a comment, and the second a suggestion. It has always astonished and pained me that, despite having first-rate Bharatanatyam dancers like Vyjayanthimala Bali and Hema Malini, not a single director in Bollywood has thought it fit to present even a three-minute scene of them performing a classical dance. Instead, they are obliged to hang around the hero while 20 girls and 20 boys

are dancing behind them, indulging in what can only be called lewd gestures. Do they have such a low opinion of our audiences to believe that they cannot appreciate even a small scene of classical dance which is so evocative?

My second point is that apart from films for the film theatre we are also beginning to make some interesting serials for television. I can mention two excellent ones. The first is *Made in Heaven*, which is a candid view of the corruption and greed behind our vulgar affluence in Delhi. The second is an excellent musical called *Bandish Bandits*, which has some of the best classical singing I have heard in many years, including superlative acting by Naseeruddin Shah and others. Perhaps in a future issue we could have a couple of essays on this new and growing phenomenon of television serials.

This double issue of the *IIC Quarterly* represents an interesting perspective of new trends in cinema. Our double issues are very popular and become collectors' choices. They frequently come out later as books, as is sure to be the case with this issue too. I commend the Editors for their achievement in coming up with this double issue, despite the raging COVID–19 pandemic.

KARAN SINGH

◆

INTRODUCTION

S. V. SRINIVAS

RATHEESH RADHAKRISHNAN

SUBHAJIT CHATTERJEE

As we write this in July 2021, there appears to be a shared concern among industry insiders and critical commentators alike that cinema as an institution is on the brink of seismic shifts at various levels. The narratives of 'end of cinema', which have been in circulation since the 1990s, are almost always traceable to the emergence of new technologies, spaces and modes of consumption, new aesthetic paradigms, piracy, and so on. However, as we write, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus specific aspects of 'late' cinema, which is not quite like its 20th century counterpart and not yet something else. The form, its creators, consumers and observers are in uncharted territory. This is a moment of peril, deep nostalgia and, as the cliché goes, an opportunity.

In its 20th-century avatar, the cinema took pride of place among the 'mechanical arts', playing a crucial role in defining the 'modern' in several parts of the world. The film studio was an important part of urban infrastructure while outdoor shooting expanded this infrastructure beyond the studio and into multiple locations. In India, the cinema hall is credited with inaugurating new forms of sociality and publicness that were predicated on more or less indiscriminate access that offered the promise of bracketing off social and economic differences. Film consumption came to be closely linked with other forms and spaces of consumption.

The film industry, in its organised and disorganised forms, has been a source of employment for workers from dozens of trades and specialisations. It also spurred the growth of industries such as print and music, and an entire set of subsidiary avenues for labour

participation. Not surprisingly, therefore, it was considered to be among the most important industries in states like Andhra Pradesh. It has been a magnet for migrant creative workers all over India and an engine for the growth of cities.

The political significance of cinema is widely known. Ranging from the propagation of established ideologies or launching new political formations led by film stars, to producing narratives of belonging or exclusion, the cinema has been an important institution for concrete as well as imaginative deliberations in the public sphere. For most of the 20th century, the Indian state was a key stakeholder in the cinema: it was the regulator of raw material (stock), infrastructure (real estate and electricity), content (censorship) and taste (film societies and festivals). However, the role of the state and the nature of symbolic negotiations afforded by the cinema underwent substantial transformation since the liberalisation of Indian economy and the expansion of cinema itself into wider consumption sectors.

Throughout the second-half of the 20th century, the film industry was, in spite of its regional diversity, constituted by more or less autonomous sectors: production, distribution and exhibition. Neither vertical nor horizontal integration was even seriously attempted after the silent era, until the final decade of the last century. Within a few decades, this chaotic, loss-making industry which, in contrast to Hollywood, was allegedly incapable of telling stories, was made over into an economic asset for the nation and an instrument for wielding soft power in the global arena. This image makeover was coeval with attempts to integrate cinema into a much larger cultural industrial complex that included fashion, retail, sports, television and, more recently, social media platforms.

The last decade or so has been a time of rapid shifts that redefined the contours of cinema. Alongside the leisure industry emerged a sometimes parallel and sometimes converging domain of production, involving film school graduates as well as rank amateurs armed with inexpensive digital cameras. Production was no longer limited to established facilities in metropolitan cities but mushroomed in provincial locations, often creating new linguistic and regional publics and diverse patterns of 'low budget' and amateur film cultures.

The result has been a hitherto unprecedented range as well as volume of 'content' that is no longer easy to categorise as cinema, and virtually impossible to catalogue or archive, in spite of the explosion of film festivals and online exhibition platforms. These processes spawned new generic and narratorial tendencies that questioned earlier assumptions about, and definitions of, cinema.

Do the pandemic, and serial lockdowns, which began in March 2020, mark a clean break with the pasts of cinema? Or is it more like the interval in our films, which heightens the drama but eventually leads us to predictable endings?

This special issue of the *IIC Quarterly* invited researchers from a variety of disciplinary and critical perspectives to reflect on Indian cinema's current place among other media-cultural forms, public institutions and what the forms' possible futures might be. The essays in this collection reflect on questions that have been asked since the earliest announcement of the death of cinema in the 1990s: What *was* the cinema? What is it becoming today and what will be the future of the form and institution that was once cinema, in the wake of disruptive technologies and emergent sociopolitical conditions? The questions may not be essentially new, but the contexts, materials and methods of our authors throw new light on pasts and futures alike. While the paradigmatic question was how to place this moment in the history of cinema and its many futures, the responding essays have shown us that under the current circumstances our framing of questions and research methods must also be as diverse as the issues that unfold around us.

The essays by M. Madhava Prasad, Moinak Biswas and Sudipto Basu examine contemporary forms in Indian popular cinemas from diverse vantage points. The issue of new 'indie' formats and their contentious relation with capitalist economic processes on the one hand, and Bollywood as an overarching consumerist media universe on the other, have come under scrutiny before. Prasad situates such industrial drives in relation to his continuing study of relations between political and symbolic forms. His analysis alerts us to the tactical moves behind the repackaging of older narrative models into neo-liberal 'aspirational' forms. Moinak Biswas examines the complex relations between recent trends in popular narrative forms, and the functional logic of contemporary capitalist culture centred around finance and the new service sectors. Biswas' scrutiny of generic and formal innovations in contemporary Hollywood as well as Indian cinemas reveals the unique operations of an affective

regime in moving images that may have symbolic correspondences to the current processes of socio-economic subjection. While Prasad concentrates on the function of political antagonisms as an operative but reconstituted marker of socially 'progressive' film narratives, and Biswas underscores the volatile constructions of contemporary film forms as an indicator of the logic of transformation in global class politics, Sudipto Basu attempts to think through the mediation of messy caste–class dynamics in the formal unfolding of generic crime dramas. Basu does a close reading of the acclaimed web series *Paatal Lok* (2020) to locate spaces and characters of 'dark' political fables in their sociopolitical contexts.

Essays by Tejaswini Ganti, Ishita Tiwary, Darshana Sreedhar Mini, and S. V. Srinivas and Raghav Nanduri, reflect on specific commercial, aesthetic and cultural implications of emerging industrial practices and technologies. The dubbing of films into other languages, a familiar-enough practice—albeit one that was largely limited to south Indian film industries till the 1990s—has emerged as the single most important contributor to the growth of the Hollywood market in India. Drawing attention to the creative challenges presented by dubbing Hollywood productions into Hindi, Tejaswini Ganti argues that the success of Hollywood in India depends on the Bombay film industry's infrastructures. The OTT platform, like 'Hollywood', is not just about content but also production processes. Ishita Tiwary argues that OTT platforms sought to standardise production, something which generations of filmmakers lamented that Indian film industries failed to do. Ipsita Barat shows how visual special effects transformed horror in Hindi films from an inexpensive genre aimed at B and C circuits to a high-end genre promising a unique theatrical experience. Darshana Sreedhar Mini's discussion of 'direct-to-OTT' productions foregrounds the aesthetics of films that were made during the nation-wide lockdown using Zoom, or other communication platforms, and mobile phones. Does the pandemic provide us with conclusive proof that the cinema as we knew it is no more? Srinivas and Nanduri take up this question in their discussion of single-screen theatres, which faced their most serious challenge in over a decade and as a direct consequence of the pandemic. They argue that the lockdown amplified the ongoing attempts at the integration of hitherto distinct and competing sectors of the Telugu film industry, as also the concentration of industry infrastructure in

the hands of a few family-owned companies. The photo essay by Gurmmeet Singh and Puneet Krishna on the Amazon Prime Video series *Mirzapur* (Seasons 1 & 2) offers us—literally and figuratively—glimpses of streaming television series, one of the several post-cinematic entertainment forms.

Uma Maheswari Bhrugubanda attempts to capture what the event of #MeToo brought to the fore concerning the organisation of the film industry. With specific reference to the Telugu industry, Bhrugubanda engages with the still unfolding debates to suggest that the #MeToo movement has been an occasion to reorient our attention to the question of labour in cinema, and its gendered organisation. Trinankur Banerjee mirrors Bhrugubanda's discussion of gendered labour by examining male stardom as a matter of on-screen figuration. His focus is the Bengali hero Jeet, whose star-image is traceable to the post-Independence screen legend Uttam Kumar, via Prosenjit Chatterjee and other superstars from the 1980s. Banerjee points to how a new form of cosmopolitan habitation makes the new star persona possible, both in terms of the shifts in economic and social forms, and the nature of the industry.

Pujita Guha's essay pays attention to the reconceptualising of land and geography in films in/on the northeastern regions in India. Setting up a dialogue between the 'geopolitic and the geologic', Guha invites us to reflect on what an ecological consideration of cinema might be, when aesthetic practices take on the materiality of the environment. She invites us to rethink what regions mean to cinematic practice. Samhita Sunya examines the 'launch and relaunch' in 2010/2018 of *Filmfare Middle East*, placing it in the long history of the magazine's presence in national and diasporic imaginations of Hindi cinema. She argues that the launches of the magazine points to the reorganisation of the 'material terrains of cinema and culture' when transnational capital is redefining notions of citizenship. Locating cinema's aspirational dimension in minor practices, or what he calls 'not-yet-cinema', Mohamed Shafeeq Karinkurayil argues for a conception of 'cinematic populism' that is grounded in its participatory nature and aspirational force. He discusses the dialectical relationship such practices have with established forms of industrial cinema, seeking a reconceptualising of cinema's transformative possibilities.

Over the past few years, film festivals have emerged as key sites for encounters with moving images. Ratheesh Radhakrishnan draws attention to film curation at film festivals and on digital platforms to highlight the tendency among filmmakers to either defer or altogether refuse to apply closure to their work. Filmmakers, he notes, present their works as projects-in-progress and the resulting palimpsest of versions recalls the parallel, if unauthorised, circulation of censored, uncensored and spliced versions of films in the pre-digital era. In the process, filmmakers come to own the fundamental instability of the object as a result of regimes of censorship as well as digital technologies. Madhuja Mukherjee's examination of a local film festival, which is organised on a very modest scale, alerts us to the category of 'amateur filmmakers' for whom the film festival neither promises large markets nor funding for future projects, but rather a legitimate space of recognition of their artistic endeavours. In relation to film curatorial work in the digital era, Mukherjee tries to understand the logic of such aspirations that are apparently not addressed by mainstream virtual platforms widely used by such 'amateurs'. Navaneetha Mokkil's article traces the continuities between the screen and exhibition spaces: queer subjectivities represented on screen facilitate the formation of collectivities around films and at festival venues. Queer film festivals, she argues, were an important site where sexuality minorities gathered as a public. In the absence of actual gatherings during the pandemic, this public relocated elsewhere, including in sites of production. She goes on to argue that this public also manifests itself in the aesthetics of entanglement that some of the recent queer films deploy.

The essays by Spandan Bhattacharya, Jenson Joseph, and Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Rashmi Sawhney look at the historical present and possible futures of cinema through the prism of cinematic archives. The archives are explored by these authors in relation to their role in envisaging new functions of accrued memories and their spectral relations to various emergent crises within and beyond the cinematic universe. Spandan Bhattacharya takes stock of myriad amateur film archives in a regional context and examines how they supplement institutional historical records as well as inspire dynamic assemblages made possible through virtual platforms. Jenson Joseph tries to understand how explorations of contemporary media forms may gain from revisiting iconic moments

of cinematic pasts. His critical intervention involves a strategic re-reading of tropes of visuality in Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964) in light of the recent discussions on 'media effects' and technologies. Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Rashmi Sawhney's collaborative text presents us with an account of archival historiography as well as ways of reconnecting the present with its 'possible histories'. Using the enigmatic myth of Anarkali and its numerous cinematic renditions, the authors unearth a range of 'historical' records that may act as vanishing mediators of the vibrant role of Muslim women's collective action in present-day political activism. All the three essays point to the vivacity of cinematic archives and the manner in which digital technology and mediations are making way for altogether different possibilities of reading them.

We would like to end with a note of thanks. For several of the authors featured in this special issue, the past year has been a period of immediate, personal loss and suffering. We are grateful to them for accepting our call and setting aside precious time and energy to write for us.

◆

CINEMA IN A CAPITALIST REPUBLIC (IN THE MAKING)

M. MADHAVA PRASAD

FORM AS SYMPTOM: THE DOUBLE-DECKER FILM

Advait Chandan's *Secret Superstar* was one of Hindi cinema's best films of 2017, with highly profitable runs in India and several overseas markets, including China. What made its success quite spectacular was the fact—or the widely circulated report—that it had been made on a budget of less than ₹15 crore, which would put it in the same category as the new crop of low-budget films that has been redefining the industry for at least a couple of decades now. Of course, such a reckoning of costs would have to mean that the star Aamir Khan's remuneration (which was reported to be ₹60 crore per film at the height of his popularity) had been waived or deferred, to be counted as a share of returns. Other reports put the budget at around ₹40 crore, which could very well include the star's reduced fee for a relatively small role in his own production, which is still a modest budget, placing it alongside a new crop of (not so) independent films—*Badhai Ho* (dir: Amit Sharma; 2018), *Andhadhun* (dir: Sriram Raghavan; 2018), *Article 15* (dir: Anubhav Sinha; 2019)—which share many of the features associated with new indie cinema. None of these latter, however, features star value comparable to Aamir Khan's.

In the Wikipedia page devoted to *Secret Superstar*, we learn that the director Advait Chandan was employed on Aamir Khan's television series *Satyameva Jayate* (2012–2014). It was there, from the stories he researched for the programme, that Chandan found inspiration for his script: not the story itself, but something that was at the core of its conception: a new idea of a 'hero'—a girl who took

up housework so that her mother could learn to drive; a milkman's son who became a golf champion—which he put at the centre of his own script. Heroism as perseverance, leading to success and deliverance from poverty. In addition, there was another enabling condition. From his own experience of learning filmmaking by watching videos, Chandan appreciated the golf champion who claimed to have learnt 60 per cent of his golf from YouTube videos, and realised that this was an indication of a new trend among the Indian middle class:

> I feel like the middle class is really getting affected by the Internet. I never went to film school, but I can sit here and watch a lesson on Stanley Kubrick's camera movements, for example. The Internet is empowering the middle class in a way that really needed to be captured on film. That was the umbrella idea—a mother and daughter in middle-class small-town India getting empowered by this amazing tool that is giving a platform to talent.[1]

Small-town India, a middle-class family, self-belief, empowerment through the Internet, a change of 'mind-set' that reconciles individuals and families bound by tradition to the new culture of achievement: all these are well-known, much written about features of the new cinemas of India. Is *Secret Superstar*, then, an example of the new cinema in Hindi, which is frequently celebrated in the media as an alternative to Bollywood, if not a formidable challenge to its supremacy?

Although it seems to fit the type when the storyline, the budget and the location are taken into consideration, there is this one thing that sticks out: the star Aamir Khan himself, who appears in the film in the helper function of Proppian narrative analysis. Indeed, the film's plot has many of the features of the folk tale, with gender roles reversed. What interests us here, however, is the formal innovation that this union of opposites—the Bollywood star and low-budget new cinema—brings about. The superstar of the title has at least four possible references: the girl who craves appreciation for her singing; the fictional singing star Shakti Kumar, played by Aamir Khan; Khan himself; and, in a final twist, the singing girl's mother whose belief in her child's talent and the determination not to let it die were decisive in her success. While the first, second

and fourth can be conceived and realised within the terms of a new cinema plot, the third necessarily exceeds and supplements it. In other words, while it is perfectly possible for an(y) actor to perform the fictional role of a singing star without affecting the organic unity of a narrative that is predominantly about the young middle-class girl's efforts to become a singer, this becomes impossible when Aamir Khan is chosen (or, as was probably the case here, chooses) to play the role. Narrative integrity is breached with the doubling of fictional star role by the superimposition of actually existing star value. The film must then achieve a new, higher order unity which transcends both elements. But the kind of unity the film realises does not seem to constitute a genuinely new form. Rather, the stitches can be seen all too clearly: it is an inorganic, provisional narrative alliance. This is acknowledged in the film itself in many ways: the worlds of these two characters are worlds apart; they come together not in any socially meaningful sense, but only through the link of recognition. One could say that the film's formal structure duplicates that of the television series *Satyameva Jayate*, which is also essentially organised as a space of recognition managed by the star. What happens at the end of the film is also somehow contrived to replicate what happens at the end of an episode featuring a real-life hero on the television show. The way in which the girl is shown not winning, yet somehow winning the award (clearly the film could not support a denouement where the girl actually won, wherein lies the secret of its unresolved formal identity), the way she diverts the heroism and success attributed to her towards her mother, serves to restore the narrative boundaries of the new cinema film, just as the heroes of *Satyameva Jayate* go home to their lives after the moment of fame they enjoy in the presence of Aamir Khan and the television audience. It introduces what one might call, for want of a better term, a 'double-decker' narrative form, enabling the combination of Bollywood's assets with new cinema affects.

Expectedly, this conjoining leaves neither element unchanged. They are one among the phenomena (the new cinemas themselves constituting the other major one) that bear witness to the aesthetic upheaval that is rocking the field of cinematic representation at the present time, while perhaps indicating the shape of things to come. Meanwhile, in their present form, with the articulation clearly visible, how can we characterise the relation between the two

elements: Is it a case of annexation of new cinema by Bollywood for its own survival? Or is it a stage in the evolution of new cinema towards a more prominent role in the industry by demonstrating its ability to commandeer the assets of Bollywood? Or are there other possibilities?

It is now widely acknowledged that far-reaching aesthetic reform has been ongoing in the Indian film industry for at least 20 years now. It has even been described as a revolution (Devasundaram, 2019). One way to approach this subject is through an examination of the finest products of this moment of change: the new subject matter they handle, how they break with the conventions of mainstream cinema, how they reflect and participate in changing values, and, in particular, the 'aspirations' of the new generations that are in the vanguard of social change. In this spirit, the new cinema[2] can be described as 'aspirational', employing a term that politicians and columnists routinely use as a self-explanatory description of India's younger population. Political discourse increasingly turns around fulfilling the aspirations of youth or failing to do so as an explanation for success or failure of parties. Accordingly, it may be said that in cinema, narratives of aspiration have replaced narratives of emancipation, even as 'life politics' replaces emancipation politics in Indian society (Giddens, 1991). Giddens' 'late modern age' can in retrospect be recognised as the age of neo-liberalism, where aspiration enters political discourse with the breakdown of the modern collectives that mediated the relation of the individual to the state. In the 'old new cinema' of the 1970s, emancipation was the overarching thematic horizon. In today's cinema, the familiar questions of poverty and deprivation, of social oppression and economic exploitation are by no means forgotten or set aside, but they are subject to narrative protocols generated by the discourse of aspiration.

What further complicates the picture is the fact that in the Indian context we can hardly speak of a wholesale transition from the age of the welfare state to neo-liberalism. Rather, while the welfare state is being systematically dismantled, we are experiencing at once both the dynamic 'all that is solid melts into air' freshness of capitalism at its socially destructive best, and the neo-liberal reconstruction of the subject of emancipation. Although India has been a part of the capitalist world system for a few centuries now, it is only in the last three decades that we have been transforming into

a capitalist society, in the proper sense of the term, which includes subjective transformations enforced by structural upheavals and reconstructions. At the same time, however, we are also participating in the globalisation process, and indeed it is largely through the globalisation route that the experience of historical, dynamic capitalism has been brought home to us. It is thus quite impossible to separate the two moments. New cinema is very much a creature of its time. It thus continues to tell stories of emancipation, but centred around individual desires.

The tendency of new cinema is towards narratives of a changing society, of ordinary people aspiring for recognition, and achieving it. It is a personal achievement, a striving against odds and against conflicts, both familial and subjective. Once, such thematic content would have been specific to middle-class cinema or feature a middle-class subject as protagonist, but in new cinema even the narratives of the poorest of the poor evince such formal refashioning, as for example, Nagaraj Manjule's *Fandry* (2013). Aspiration was a subjective orientation specific to the middle class, given its intermediate position in the social structure of modern societies (Poulantzas, 1979), but in the neo-liberal present, it is universalised. This does not mean, however, that aspiration is always politically retrogressive. On the contrary, it is in these narratives of aspiration that we see—for the first time in the history of modern Indian cultural production—caste critique combined with the ideology of individualism. The difference between Shambu of *Do Bigha Zamin* (dir: Bimal Roy; 1953) and Jabya of *Fandry* measures the distance travelled by Indian society in the interim. Jabya's aspirations are not confined to the realm of strictly basic needs, the means of sustenance, even though his family is desperately poor. It is capitalist consumer society that provides the models (as can be gauged from, among other things, the advertisement showing a fashionable male that is briefly glimpsed in the film); it is the discourse of symbolic equality which constitutes the limit concept of capitalist democracy and the corresponding institutions, the school in particular, that provides the setting for this turn. In other words, with the rapid penetration of capitalism into all aspects of social life in India, films show a keen awareness of the necessity of rebooting politics.

The enabling condition for this aesthetic tendency that we are calling the new cinema is of course the rise of genre cinema in the Indian context, when the older hold-all social film broke down under pressure from capitalist commodification logic, as initially embodied in the multiplex as an exhibition space. The very experience of choosing one door out of many, each leading to a different film screening, is part of the new phenomenology of spectatorship, which the multiplex redefines as a consumerist activity. In the industry this was paralleled by a period of learning by imitation, which saw a rash of films that copied Western or Korean originals shot by shot, in much the same way that aspiring artists copy the work of the masters, sitting in a museum. At this initial stage, what the new cinema placed before us was primarily a new filmmaking subject, for the cinema of aspiration had its beginnings in the aspirational orientation of the filmmakers themselves. Many developments, in technology (e.g., cheaper digital cameras), cultural economy (the access to world cinema) and society (the commodification of labour) made this aesthetic transition possible. Mainstream Bombay Hindi cinema, too, now termed Bollywood and led by a group of young sons of industry leaders, experienced a learning curve involving rampant social (rather than aesthetic) imitation, a homegrown *cinema de papa*, in more than one sense of the term, promoting upper-caste family values and offering visions of the conquest of the globe by India and Indians. A common myth about Indian popular cinema has been that it is a *culturally* distinguished product, catering to the unique sensibilities of Indian audiences. The overhaul of the mainstream film form and the advent of new forms have demonstrated that the distinction was, rather, *historical*.

Thus began the reorganisation of the film scene in the era of full-scale, structurally disruptive capitalism. Two statements capture the essence of this split: Karan Johar's quip, in the heady days of the 1990s, that his audience was in Birmingham, not Bihar; and Abhishek Chaubey's more recent, and apparently oxymoronic, assertion that he was a 'regional Hindi filmmaker'.[3] New cinema is partly distinguished, as Chaubey's remark indicates, by a turning away from the metropolitan and global spaces towards the interior, to what has been referred to in the enthusiastic literature about this cinema as small-town India. Indeed, the small towns of north India—UP mainly, but also other states of the Hindi belt—have been the named or unnamed settings for new cinema narratives. While this and many other features have been highlighted as the hallmarks

of new cinema's distinction, I want to pursue here briefly one formal difference between the new cinema and Bollywood, which I believe to be of lasting aesthetic significance, by turning to the genre of the sports film, which has a significant presence in both Bollywood and the new cinema.

THE RETREAT FROM ALLEGORY

Bollywood has produced a number of sports films, with *Chakde! India* (dir: Shimit Amin; 2007) perhaps pioneering a trend which soon caught on, although *Lagaan* (dir: Ashutosh Gowariker; 2001) may also lay claim to this honour. The Bollywood sports film, when seen in the larger context of Bollywood, proves to be a subset of a hyper-national cinema, which includes a slew of war films among others. A sub-genre of sports bio-pics has also flourished with successful films like *Mary Kom* (dir: Omung Kumar; 2014), *Bhag Milkha Bhag* (dir: Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra; 2013), *M. S. Dhoni: The Untold Story* (dir: Neeraj Pandey; 2016) among them, again infused with nationalist thematics. *Dangal* (dir: Nitesh Tiwari; 2016), interestingly combining bio-pic elements with fictional dramatic technique (and nationalism again), proved hugely popular. An interesting and exceptional case is *Paan Singh Tomar* (dir: Tigmanshu Dhulia; 2012), which inclines towards new cinema aesthetics, is based on real events, but veers towards nationalist ideology in the end.

For a perspective on the sports film in India it is useful to briefly revisit an earlier era, before Ram Gopal Verma, Mahesh Bhatt and others introduced genre cinema in India. *Boxer* (dir: Raj Sippy; 1983) opens with a dedication to 'all the sportsmen of India who stood their ground against all the odds and brought glory to our country', but its narrative conflict unfolds in the familiar world of pre-globalisation Hindi film narrative, where divine will is actively at work. By overvaluing the role of human effort against divine grace, the boxer protagonist invites the wrath of God and it is only after he repents that his son restores boxing renown to the family. God is here an active director of events, and the narrative unfolds in the time span of two generations: although a sports film, with popular action hero Mithun Chakravarty, it retains the conventional narrative framework of Hindi cinema of the time.

In capitalist India, we see this framework breaking down and the sports film as a genre film coming into its own. The divine presence, if it remains, is no longer envisaged in the role of puppeteer, controlling the lives of people; nor does it give form to the narrative. In place of this cosmic order, service to the nation is the new overarching horizon. The loss of family honour and its redemption by the next generation, this standard trope of generational time, disappears, to be replaced by shorter periods of linear narrative time. Flashbacks may sometimes import other time periods into the diegesis, but the narrative's boundaries are within a temporality without long breaks. Such are the big budget star films mentioned earlier—*Chak de! India* being the trend-setter—whether based on real sports heroes or fictional ones. And in all of them there is a strong, almost overpowering, presence of not just a national but a nationalist allegory. The characters are defined by their relation to the nation, their success is bound up with the nation's honour, their weaknesses are a threat to its integrity, their dishonour is its dishonour.

There are also a number of films of the sports genre that belong to the new cinema category, whether independent or a product of diversifying Bollywood investment. One of the early films of this type was Nagesh Kukunoor's *Iqbal* (2005). The drama of this cricketer's life is a social one, where his family, a local coach, and the machinations of another, money-minded coach, provide the occasions for dramatic conflict. Aspiration encounters and overcomes obstacles through a combination of talent and the support of family members and sympathetic strangers. In other films of this type, the obstacles are different: in *Shor in the City* (dir: Raj Nidimoru and Krishna D. K.; 2011), a cricketer struggles with the temptation of bribing his way into a league cricket team. *Irudhi Suttru/Saala Khadoos* (dir: Sudha Kongara; 2016) is about a female boxer and her coach, power games in sports organisations, jealousy and misunderstanding, but no nationalist scaffolding. Such films are common in the non-Hindi new cinemas as well: *Golconda High School* (dir: Mohan Krishna Indraganti; 2011) and *Jersey* (dir: Gowtam Tinnanuri; 2019) in Telugu; *Sudani from Nigeria* (dir: Zakariya; 2018) in Malayalam; *Vennila Kabaddi Kuzhu* (dir: Suseenthiran; 2009) in Tamil, to name a few.

Instead of the double-decker format identified in *Secret Superstar*, in the case of the sports film, then, it would appear that there is a vertical split, with one kind being the exclusive monopoly of Bollywood, featuring the grand theme of service to the nation

through success in sports; and the other, low-budget variety, where the national team or the international championship may sometimes figure as individual goals, but the drama finds its means and ends in the social realm. A political space in which characters figure as patriotic subjects, on the one hand, and a social space where they tend to be pursuing individual desires and inclinations, on the other.

What separates the Bollywood sports film from its new cinema variant is the supplement of nationalism, which in turn calls for the big star. In *Dangal*, this nationalism reaches claustrophobic proportions, leaving no room for the play of individual desire. '*Har pailwan akhade mein yeh soch ke utarta hai ke woh des ke liye kuch karega*' (Every wrestler enters the arena with the thought of doing something for the country), says the wrestler (Aamir Khan), who had to give up wrestling in order to take up a job. It is not your fault, says his pregnant wife, that you couldn't win a medal for the country. And he responds—unaware that she is carrying twin girls—that his son will accomplish what he failed to. '*Des ke liye* gold *jeetega hamara beta. Apna tiranga sabse upar leharavega, dekhlena.*' (Our son will win a gold for the country. He will make the tricolour fly higher than the rest, wait and see.) The elimination of any trace of individual aspiration, unless it is the desire for sacrifice, is complete. The jouissance of national or some other higher unity, which is experienced in times of crisis and danger by members of a community (*sarfaroshi ki tamanna*), is routinely invoked in the blockbuster sports film as an embellishment, as if without it the Bollywood star's status would be diminished. The representational strategy here is designed to suggest that what we are witnessing is a spontaneous, popular expression of a nationalist sentiment that inheres in every ordinary Indian, the 'aam admi' of today's political discourse. The suggestion is that society is so thoroughly steeped in the longing to serve the nation, that it is impossible to separate the social from the national–political. On the other hand, though the seams are well concealed, it is possible to detect in *Dangal*, too, evidence of recourse to the double-decker format, i.e., the commandeering of a potential new cinema plot for the greater good of the nation and Bollywood. This is accomplished by moving the father's role to the centre of the narrative.

One is reminded here of Fredric Jameson's controversial assertion that 'all Third World narratives' are national allegories (1986: 65–88). While such a comprehensive claim may be difficult to prove, there is no doubt that the national–allegorical is a common feature of modern Indian narratives, whether literary or filmic. In popular cinema, as we have seen above, we can see a religious allegory at work as well, alongside the national. But in contemporary new cinema, there is a falling off of these and the emergence of a post-allegorical social world that is fragmented, localised, cut off from ready sources of grandeur and spectacle. Consequently, it engages in the exploration of new psycho-moral realities as well as issues of emancipation and freedom, which are not new as much as unexplored in Indian cinema hitherto, issues that arise in a capitalist society which is stripped of the assuring presence of divine protection.

This new cinema is sometimes compared with the middle-class cinema of the 1970s, where, too, the turning away from politics towards a social world is repeatedly staged (Prasad, 1998: chapter 7). But those films were marked by a consciousness of being surrounded, besieged by political upheaval. In today's cinema, the social world comes into its own, and instead of being mortgaged to a political allegory is itself the site of political engagement. Sucked into the social space, the national, the political in general, like the religious, is a thematic element, having lost its allegorical position of control. It is instructive in this connection to see how the advent of Hindutva is registered in new cinema and in Bollywood. The latter's response is to produce films with secular themes of communal unity, remaining within the allegorical frame. In the new cinema, on the other hand, this new element is registered as a presence in society: as in *Mukkabaaz* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2017), where the hero engages in conversation with a man who was captured on video beating two Muslim boys for taking cows to slaughter, or in the recent *Chhalang* (dir: Hansal Mehta; 2020), where the PT master is shown leading a gang that beats up couples on Valentine's Day, but gives it up when he meets and falls in love with a colleague. Another interesting instance is found in *Dum Lagake Haisha* (dir: Sharat Kataria; 2015) which features an RSS-like outfit to which the hero belongs.

Bollywood's new nationalism, so different from the old Manoj Kumar variety, is as much a product of capitalist India as is new cinema. It, too, largely submits to the victory of secular clock time, giving up on the tales that straddled generations. On the other hand,

it is obvious that the kind of stentorian nationalist rhetoric that Bollywood dispenses would sound ridiculous in a low-budget film. The star and the rich production values are a necessary precondition for the successful staging of nationalist drama.

It is not only a question of whether low-budget new cinema films can pull off a national allegory. There is the additional question of whether they want to. And some of these films seem to indicate that far from being a matter of diminished capacity, the ideological goal is the emancipation of the individual subject from the allegorical frame. The industry, on the other hand, continues its efforts to capture the material basis of new cinema for a more Bollywood-friendly aesthetic, as is evident when, say, *Article 15* is placed alongside a film like *Newton* (dir: Amit Masurkar; 2017). It is not just a matter of coping with reduced budgets, or of lowering one's expectations, but of actively spurning the national allegory—that space of schematic, Manichean, epic and allegorical fitments—to stage the production of individual subjects declaring their allegiance to a new ethical, if not a political, order. No film better exemplifies this breakaway resolve than Anurag Kashyap's *Mukkabaaz*, where, in the end, the boxer-hero makes the choice of losing the final match, of giving up the struggle for honour in favour of the private life of a citizen. Neo-liberalism is the common ground of both Bollywood and new cinema, but they offer two different expressions of that allegiance.

The new cinema is an active participant in the production of the ideology of neo-liberalism, but in its narratives the individual repeatedly emerges from the shackles of traditional society into the space of citizenship, freedom and equality. Emancipation, refigured in individual terms, is its major concern. Lessons in social improvement abound, as small-town dwellers show themselves to be receptive to modern ideas of equality, and those who stick stubbornly to old hierarchies are given a wide berth, as in *Mukkabaaz,* while intoning, in the words of one of its songs, '*bahut hua samman*' ('enough respect already').

◆

NOTES

1. See Advait Chandan on 'Secret Superstar' and the 21st century zeitgeist. *Reuters*. Cited in Wikipedia entry on *Secret Superstar*.

2. The phrase 'new cinemas' is used here to refer to the current trend and is not to be confused with the alternative cinema of the 1970s to which it was sometimes applied. I shall refer to the latter as 'the old new cinema' on occasion, or by its other names: 'middle' and 'parallel' cinema. While 'independent' has been used for the current new cinemas, it can be somewhat misleading as it does not cover all the cases, especially when it is a question of exploring aesthetic transformations on a country-wide scale.

3. See Abhishek Chaubey's comments in *The Hindu*, 4 March 2019.

REFERENCES

Devasundaram, Ashwin Immanuel (ed.). 2019. *Indian Cinema Beyond Bollywood: The New Independent Cinema Revolution*. New York: Routledge.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Jameson, Fredric. 1986. 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (Autumn).

Poulantzas, Nicos. 1979. *Fascism and Dictatorship*. London: Verso.

Prasad, M. Madhava. 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

◆◆

IS IT POST-CINEMA?

**MOINAK
BISWAS**

I

These are stray thoughts about the present—the present embodied in cinema. Is it cinema any longer? That question has been asked many times already, and answered largely from the two sides of a divide. There is another question, though. Is it the same 'present' that we knew earlier? The new form of the present keeps swallowing up the future: a typical economic instance are the financial instruments that trade in futures. It is pertinent to think of financialisation of our daily lives in relation to our subject as the moving image today, in its multiple shapes, seems to be growing more and more into a mirror of contemporary capitalism. This is not because of the stories the films tell, but for the structure of senses on which they thrive. The video image, and then the digital, seem to have reorganised the cinematic universe in tune with the sensory reality of today's capitalism. That sensory dimension extends to the texture of images, movement and time, and aural processing. Cinema was always related to the experience and logics of capitalism, but in the era of finance, it is not the larger structures of capitalism but its unfolding, unstable present that seems to have established a connection with the way we perceive cinema. Finance capital becomes independent of real production, operates on credits, stocks, bonds and derivatives. Its power has become pervasive enough to make the production sector itself dependent on its functions. Finance moves at millisecond speed across the globe, collapsing space and time at will, building up a heavy load of the virtual around every transaction. Its ups and downs can occur

in autonomous zones without immediately impacting the totality of an economy. Totality and integral vision become elusive in its wake. All these, translated into aesthetic terms, begin to show some correspondence with today's cinematic experience.

Some scholars have called this condition post-cinema (Denson and Leyda, 2016; Shaviro, 2010; Malter Haegener, et al., 2016). Others think it is but cinema re-articulated. Francesco Casetti is an important voice among the latter. He talks about the 'ipse identity' of cinema that in the past allowed it to 'remain itself even when it adopted new guises'.[1] Conceived in this form of identity, cinema continually absorbs change and readjusts its contours. Yet others have denied the claim that cinema has at all changed fundamentally. They would say the celluloid-to-digital transition is in line with many other technological shifts witnessed by the history of cinema (Belton, 2002). One does get a sense from the writings heralding, and sometimes celebrating, 'post-cinema' that in their haste to announce the death of cinema they overlook the persistence of the cinematic as a central element in the media ecology. It is nevertheless impossible to overlook that the digital turn in cinema has a special connection with the way the personal computers, mobile phones, the Internet and digital data flows have transformed economic and social life. This point was surely missed by someone like John Belton, who wrote in 2002 that the audience will not find in digital projection anything new, which they did with the introduction of sound, colour and Cinerama! Such arguments overlooked the expansion of cinema far and wide beyond the theatre.

There is reason to be confused by the claims of post-cinema. Cinema being progressively integrated to media ecology is surely not the same as it dissolving into a mediatic universe? One is not certain what the 'post' signifies apart from the fact that cinema now bleeds across forms and formats. The connection between post-cinema and contemporary forms of capitalism has been often understood in terms of 'affect'. It is well-known that Gilles Deleuze's (and Felix Guattari's) use of that word has played a crucial role in defining it for contemporary criticism. Deleuze has conceived affect as an 'entity', something that is '(I)mpersonal and is distinct from every individuated state of things: it is none the less *singular*, and can enter into singular combinations or conjunctions with other affects' (1986: 98).

It is different from emotion in that affect is not owned by individual subjects; rather, the individual is traversed by affects.

Affect is a potential, what Deleuze calls 'power' and 'quality'. It is actualised in situations and characters but needs to be considered independently of these. Brian Massumi, a preeminent Deleuze scholar, summarises the Western situation in the following manner:

> We're leaving the world we Europeans inhabited since the late 15th century: Eurocentrism, Enlightenment; Monocular Perspective, Projection and Vanishing Point, the Notion of a Future and a Past lined up on a linear trajectory; the Ground has moved from under us: perspective, upright, forward, back, up, down; the Individual has become dividual: sensation, perception, the different senses, de-hierarchized, de-territorialized. The Unconscious is de-personalized, 'out there' in the form of contingency and coincidence. Affect is de-localized.[2]

Globalisation as a general condition and postmodernism as a cultural paradigm were commonly invoked in the first phase of debates as these symptoms became visible. One now encounters more specific morphological descriptions as technological innovation, media networks and cinematic processes operate increasingly on the same plane.

To speak of the new affinity between cinema and landscapes of finance is not so much to pay attention to films talking about the contemporary situation as to attend to the 'affective' horizon cinema shares with capitalist reality. A typical aspect of cinema in the digital era is the way films take liberties with the rules of continuity editing. The axis rules, for instance, have gone haywire. Unities of action and space are violated at will; the stability of the very frame is barely guaranteed. The long mediation of television, followed by mass access to image-making, has fostered this style. The expansion of cinema into multiple moving-image phenomena has made filmic address, as it were, an allegory of this expansion. The elided space–time between shots in a sequence, the borderless fluidity of the frame that seems to hold the potential of an all-round view (because the shot can unpredictably move in any direction it wants without necessarily following an object, and can stop without arriving anywhere in particular), the frequent lack of image definition arising out of randomness of focus, etc., mirror the spillover of cinema from theatre to public, home and personal screens.
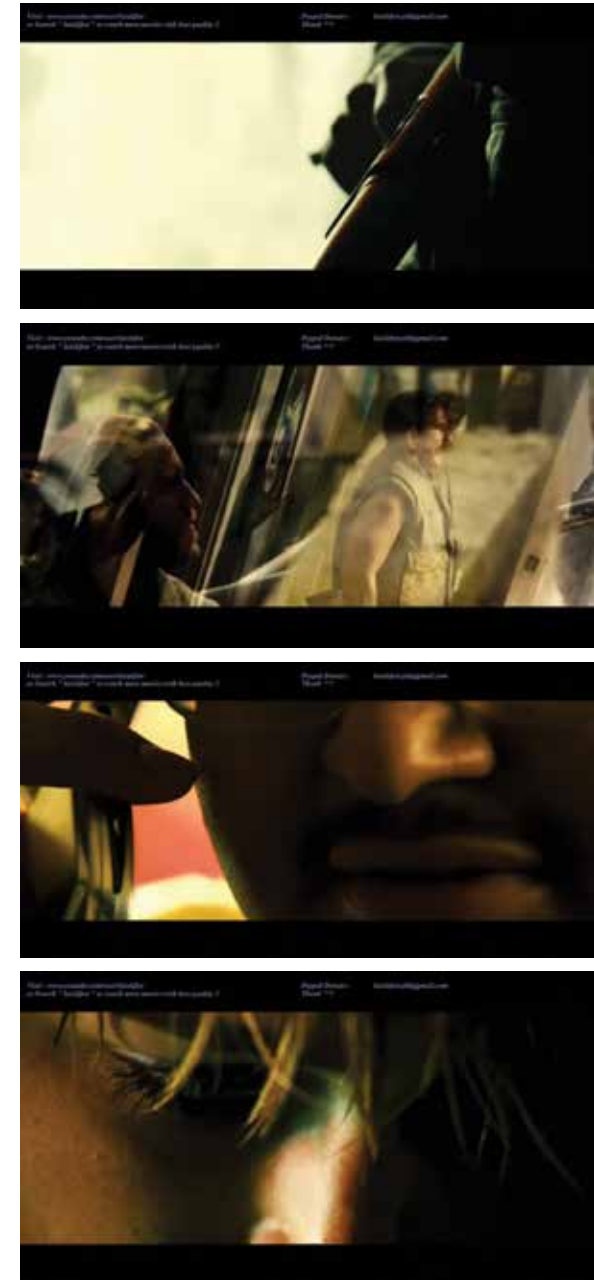
Successive shots from *Domino* (dir: Tony Scott; 2005)

As films displayed these characteristics, critics showed divergent understanding of their implications. Writing in 2002, David Bordwell used the expression 'intensified continuity' for the new mode of film editing. 'The faster cutting rate, the bipolar extremes of lens lengths, and the reliance on tight singles are the most pervasive features of intensified continuity: virtually every contemporary mainstream film will exhibit them' (also see Bordwell, 2007a). He found it becoming a 'baseline' style for 'international mass market cinema and a sizeable fraction of exportable "art cinema"'. But he did not see in all this a real break with the continuity style of 'classical cinema'.

> Contrary to claims that Hollywood style has become post-classical, we are still dealing with a variant of classical filmmaking. An analysis of virtually any film from the period I've picked out will confirm a simple truth: nearly all scenes in nearly all contemporary mass-market movies (and in most 'independent' films) are staged, shot, and cut according to principles which crystallized in the 1910s and 1920s (ibid.: 24).

Bordwell seems to discount the possibility of a break as he is generally averse to considering cinema against larger ideological formations. Others have asserted the usefulness of understanding the new style in terms of a rupture with what was known as cinema in the pre-digital past. Even Shaviro, in his Deleuzian language, has argued that we now see new modes of connecting disconnected spaces while keeping them disconnected still in a fundamental way, indicating that connections, even as they exist, do not guarantee homogeneity of space or uniform flow of time. In what he would call 'post-continuity films', 'we enter into the spacetime of modern physics; or better, into the "space of flows", and the time of microintervals and speed-of-light transformations, that are characteristic of globalized, high-tech financial capital' (Shaviro, 2016: 60).

These are observations made on the kind of films that directors like Tony Scott, Paul Greengrass and Michael Bay were making in the 2000s, where the average shot length (ASL) came down to two seconds or less, compared to the ASL of five to seven seconds in the 1980s, and six to eight seconds in the 1960s and 1970s. But critics proposing post-cinema, or post-continuity, would argue that even films characterised by long takes have developed perceptions of space–time that leave behind earlier cinema's fundamental approach to the world. The phenomenologically oriented critic Vivian Sobchack also sees a break of sorts in what she conceptualises as an electronic mode of experience corresponding to the phase of multinational capitalism and postmodernism.

> Narrative, history, and a centered (and central) investment in the human lived body and its mortality become atomized and dispersed across a system that constitutes temporality not as a coherent flow of mordantly conscious experience but as the eruption of ephemeral desire and the transmission of random, unevaluated, and endless information (2016: 112).

The focus often slides in these writings from the material basis of the medium (electronic signal, pixel) to formal properties (narrative, editing). While that calls for more conceptual work of separation, the very nature of the technology–medium–form relationship that we now witness prompts an easy slippage from one term to the other. Image forms today no longer try to disavow the materiality of the medium or technology as earlier realism did; on the contrary, these are frequently foregrounded.

II

Is it a coincidence that film-philosophy has consolidated itself as a field in the same period? Thomas Elsaesser, that most dependable guide to film discourse (who left us recently), would believe it is not. Elsaesser argues that both European contemporary cinema and European philosophers writing on cinema have moved towards a conception of film as thought (2019). The focus has shifted from film theory to film-philosophy, which Elsaesser sees as a shift from such questions as 'is film an art?', or 'is film a language?', to a new question: 'Is film a reality that thinks?'. To consider film itself as a process of thinking, as Stanley Cavell, Deleuze or Jean-Luc Nancy do, is no longer to engage in the philosophy of film; the two terms—film and philosophy—are conjoined in film-philosophy, rather than one being set above the other. For Elsaesser, the turn (in the last 25 years or so) from semiotic and cognitivist schools of film theory, to the new ontological approaches of film-philosophy,

indicates, among other things, Western culture's 'slow transitioning from a 500-year episteme: the central perspective as a dominant representational system, now superseded or supplemented by other visual interfaces' (ibid.: 27).

The sense that the 'central perspective'—which, as a symbolic form, has dominated not only aesthetic, but also historiographic and scientific pictures of the world—is on the wane derives not only from the postmodernist challenge to the depth model of thinking, but the very order of images today seems to offer concrete alternatives to that system. I would like to point out a feature of the film image in this connection, which has become commonplace over the past couple of decades. It is the shaky shot. Bordwell calls it the 'unsteadicam', referring to the Steadicam contraption that cinematographers use to stabilise mobile shots (2007b). But it is not only a matter of hand-held shooting that Bordwell discusses. The effect has become so commonplace that there is now software that does it in the post-production phase. It makes all frame-lines unsteady, as if what is outside the cinematic world is continuous with what lies within the frame. This in principle unsettles the very idea of the frame and the image that we have lived with for ages. That the limits of the frame can be so regularly undermined goes to show the altered relationship between the moving image and the world. The two seem to be laid out on the same level. This could be another way of arriving at a formulation similar to the one Elsaesser gives us about the 'automatism' of cinema:

> (A) more philosophical understanding of the cinema's automatism can trace another path not just from the analogue photograph to the digital image, but from cinema as an aesthetic phenomenon to cinema as ontology: something that has altered or at least affected our relation to—and being in—the world (2019: 42).

Using a Marxist approach, Jonathan Beller has traced out a longer history of correspondence between capitalist production processes and the cinema, between the function of money, for example, and the photograph. What he calls the 'cinematic mode of production' takes on a new dimension as all visuality is rendered cinematic in late capitalism.

If the philosophers have found cinema to act like the world itself, these scholars find the space between economy and culture to be disappearing, making them translatable into each other's terms.

III

The new regime of the moving image is no less familiar to us in India. The history of photography and cinema in this country shows that there was practically no gap with the West in the use of these technologies. For the same reason, the East-West difference model does not help in understanding these forms. But difference has indeed existed in the development of capitalism between India and the Euro-American contexts where most of film theory is spawned. A well-known formulation based on a conception of such difference was made around the unique heterogeneity of the popular Indian film form. That it could incorporate linearised narrative as well as quasi-autonomous spectacles (song and dance, action, comic interlude), that both voyeuristic and exhibitionistic elements could exist side by side in it, was seen as marks of persistence of pre-modern/pre-capitalist substance within the cinematic body. That substance, to put it another way, resisted the full emergence of realism.

The terms of the debate got reversed in the 1990s. Indian popular cinema earned a new legitimacy riding on the wave of globalisation. An international Indian elite endorsed it as authentic Indian culture. Soon academic film studies developed a near-exclusive focus on popular cinema. As the main production centres, Mumbai, Chennai and Hyderabad, underwent a refashioning in the period, with expanded markets, new formats of distribution (television, home devices, Internet), corporate investment, and all-round technical upgradation, the heterogeneous popular form was rearticulated, often self-consciously, as postmodern kitsch. It could jump into a post-industrial avatar without passing through the standard modern phase. The 'loose' form now played host to a series of 'attractions', with exotic spaces and objects captured in commodity forms, no longer viewed as distant lure to the common man, but as part of a map navigated by the new Indian consumer. The lag of capitalist development in economy was bridged in culture.

Films such as *Roja* (dir: Mani Rathnam; 1993)*, Humse Hai Muqabla* (dir: S. Shankar; 1994) or *Sapnay* (dir: Rajiv Menon; 1997)

presented early examples of the new logics of space and movement, to be supplemented by the kind of extended family melodrama that 'Bollywood' came to stand for. The TV commercial aesthetic of the time shows a perfect match with its Western counterpart. It did not take any time for the new consumer class, or classes on the immediate periphery of urban consumers, to learn to decode a form that crammed an excess of information within 15 or 30 seconds of commercial TV spots. More importantly, they learned the logic of displacement of the commodity being sold into all kinds of shapes, colours, sensations along affective pathways. This language was shared between commercials, films, music videos and other forms. Eyes and ears of the Indian spectator were quickly readjusted to the logics of this new order of the moving image. The success of globalisation in terms of levelling the field of perception is undeniable at this level.

Capitalism today feeds on our behaviour and ordinary action. Our movements, opinions, choices are all turned into value-producing data. The increasing penetration of Internet-based forms in Indian society, where there are now 10 per cent more active Internet users in rural areas than the urban centres, has meant that increasingly larger sections of the population are brought into the domain of the 'cinematic' production of value.[3] I would like, however, to end this brief note by pointing to one effect of this in Indian cinema, which helps approach the situation beyond the model of an all-controlling capitalism. This is the point where the spontaneous modes of the market of necessity negotiate histories of aesthetic forms and political aspirations on the ground. I have in mind the series of films made recently in Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Marathi and Kannada characterised by a strong registration of places and ordinary human bodies. In film after film, we see neighbourhoods and habitats marked by a sense of collective, precarious living: from the old mohallas in north Indian towns, to tenements in Madurai, to semi-urban clusters in Ernakulam.[4] Neighbourhoods are closely harmonised with the vivid capture of subaltern bodies. Actors are chosen to bring to the screen an immediate imprint of labour and privation, and a sense of desperation poised on the threshold of violence.[5]

Shaviro, following Deleuze, calls the proliferating locations of contemporary cinema 'deconnected', despite their apparent

Court (dir: Chaitanya Tamhane; Marathi; 2014)

Anhe Ghore da Daan (dir: Gurvinder Singh; Punjabi; 2011)

Angadi Theru (dir: Vasanthbalan; Tamil; 2010)

Kammatipaadam (dir: Rajeev Ravi; Malayalam; 2016)

narrative connection. They are extensions of what Deleuze called 'any-space-whatevers' in post-War European and American cinema.[6] Shaviro makes the perceptive observation that in many contemporary films,'the blankness of urban spaces is as much a result of intensive capital investment, as it is of capital flight' (2010: 116). Whereas, in the context of cinematic modernism Delueze identified 'any-space-whatevers' as having virtual powers and qualities, Shaviro finds capitalism in our time increasingly subsuming the virtual into its fold. There is no vantage point from which these disparate spaces could be perceived as part of a unity. These spaces cannot be conceived, therefore, in terms of realism. The vivid and detailed portrayals of neighbourhoods that we see in Indian films seem to form a horizontal series. Every locale is complete, and heavy with a sensory load; bodies, speech and repertoire of gestures strongly evoke specific modes of living. But they seem to be self-sufficient environments. It is difficult to imagine them as part of a totality. The older form of realism cannot be invoked to make full sense of the way reality-effects are generated in these films.

Yet it is not a situation akin to the one that Shaviro finds in Olivier Assayas' *Boarding Gate* (2007) or Richard Kelly's *Southland Tales* (2006).[7] It is possible to see this tendency in Indian cinema as part of politics more than economics. For Western observers of the connection between finance capitalism and cinema, the question of representation has become redundant for understandable reasons.

Their theoretical orientation avoids the dualism of reality and representation. The collapse of the gap between the two appears as a possibility when the order of simulacra become co-extensive with reality. But the idea of representation may still serve a critical purpose as we try to make sense of the Indian phenomenon in question. What seems to be happening with the new 'realism' of location is a political process, where places and people that are yet to find a place in the frame of representation get access to it. Political and aesthetic representation converge provisionally in such events. As more and more regional, caste and ethnic groups stake their claim in the field of electoral politics, and as electoral strategy itself is based increasingly on professional demographic analysis made along these lines, locales and communities take on a new 'visibility'. Cinematic visibility, it can be argued, is an integral part of it. Needless to say, this is not politics being reflected in cinema, it is a matter rather of the two terms being part of a continuum. Under such compulsions, cinema continues to gather its scattered limbs back into its body, and continues to work as cinema in the familiar sense.

I would not suggest that India presents an exception. This is only one among many tendencies in Indian cinema. But this particular case, which I wish to study in detail on another occasion, goes to show that cinema, as it is integrated into an economic form, can return to its familiar cinematic identity through politics. The representational energy employed in the regional Indian films (so far as it is found in Bombay films the latter takes on a regional character) produces effects that belong both to the realm of the hyperreal and to a reconfigured realism. The striking vividness of locations and bodies evokes already circulating haptic images that saturate the audio-visual space; as such they belong to the order of pure circulation. But so far as the films aspire to produce an authentic portrayal of lives and habitats usually kept invisible, they perform a more familiar cinematic function where representation retains a degree of critical purchase.

◆

NOTES

1.   See Casetti (2015: 21). 'Ipse-identity' is a concept Casetti borrows from Paul Ricouer, who contrasted it with 'idem-identity'.

2. Thomas Elsaesser cites Brian Massumi's essay, 'The Autonomy of Affect' (1995),
    as the source of this quote. While I borrow this from Elsaesser's book (2019:
    36–37), I suspect he might have made a mistake. The passage cannot be found in
    the essay. It has to be from some other text by Massumi. On affectivity, capitalism
    and ideology, see Massumi (2015: 89–92).

3. A report by the Internet & Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) and Nielsen
    showed rural India had 227 million active Internet users, 10 per cent more than
    urban India's about 205 million, as of November 2019.

4. I am thinking of films like *Tanu Weds Manu Returns* (dir: Anand L. Rai; 2015)
    in Hindi; *Aadukalam* (dir: Vetrimaran; 2011) in Tamil; and *Kammati Padam*
    (dir: Rajeev Ravi; 2016) in Malayalam.

5. For example, *Subramaniapuram* (dir: M. Sashikumar; 2008); *Visaranai*
    (dir: Vetrimaran; 2016); *Kammati Padam* (dir: Rajeev Ravi; 2016).

6. See Deleuze (1986: 109). 'Any-space-whatever is not an abstract universal, in
    all times, in all places. It is a perfectly singular space, which has merely lost its
    homogeneity, that is, the principle of its metric relations or the connection of its
    own parts, so that the linkages can be made in an infinite number of ways. It is a
    space of virtual conjunction, grasped as pure locus of the possible.'

7. See Shaviro (2010) for a detailed discussion of these films in chapters 3 and 4.

REFERENCES

Beller, Jonathan. 2006. *The Cinematic Mode of Production*, *Attention Economy and the
    Society of the Spectacle*. New Hampshire: University of New England Press.

Belton, John. 2002. 'Digital Cinema: A False Revolution', *October*, 100, Spring.

Bordwell, David. 2007a. 'Intensified Continuity Revisited'. https://www.
    davidbordwell.net/blog/2007/05/27/intensified-continuity-revisited/. Accessed on
    18 February 2021.

———. 2007b. 'Unsteadicam Chronicles'. http://www.davidbordwell.net/blog/
    2007/08/17/unsteadicam-chronicles/. Accessed on 18 February 2021.

———. 2002. 'Intensified Continuity, Visual Style in Contemporary American Film',
    Film Quarterly, 55 (3).

Casetti, Francesco. 2015. *The Lumiere Galaxy, Seven Keywords for the Cinema to Come*.
    New York: Columbia University Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1986. *Cinema 1, The Movement-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and
    Barbara Haberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Denson, Shane and Julia Leyda (eds.). 2016. *Post-Cinema, Theorizing 21st Century
    Film*. Falmer: Reframe Books.

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2019. *European Cinema and Continental Philosophy, Film as Thought
    Experiment*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

Hagener, Malte, Vinzenz Hediger and Alena Strohmaier (eds.). 2016. *The State of
    Post-Cinema, Tracing the Moving Image in the Age of Digital Dissemination*. London:
    Palgrave Macmillan.

Massumi, Brian. 2015. 'Ideology and Escape'. *Politics of Affect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

———. 1995. 'The Autonomy of Affect', *Cultural Critique*, 31, Autumn.

Shaviro, Steven. 2016. 'Post-Continuity: An Introduction', in Shane Denson and Julia
    Leyda (eds.), *Post-Cinema, Theorizing 21st Century Film*. Falmer: Reframe Books.

———. 2010. *Post-Cinematic Affect*. Winchester, UK: Zero Books.

Sobchack, Vivian. 2016. 'The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic,
    Cinematic and Electronic "Presence"', in Shane Denson and Julia Leyda (eds.),
    Post-Cinema, Theorizing 21st Century Film. Falmer: Reframe Books.

❖❖

CYNICAL REALISM AND THE IMMOBILITY OF THE CONTEMPORARY

SUDIPTO BASU

PROLOGUE: ON THE MULTIPLE IM/MOBILITIES OF THE CONTEMPORARY

Although this paper is concerned with the genealogy of a realist aesthetic that has become dominant of late in Indian cinema, I begin by noting the conditions in which I write. Like many others, I have been living this past year mostly inside a room. But while the pandemic has generated a range of inertial temporalities, it must be remembered that COVID-induced immobilities have only intensified and unequally redistributed other kinds of immobilities that preceded it. The arrival of COVID–19 in India in late March 2020 is, therefore, one of a series of events which includes: CAA/NRC (Citizenship Amendment Act/National Register of Citizens) being declared; the countrywide protests against it, including such occupations as Shaheen Bagh; the Delhi Elections; Islamophobic hate campaigns, culminating in the Delhi Pogrom; the vilification of Tableeghi Jamaat as 'super spreaders'; the rushed total lockdown; the migrant poor in metropolises, desperately waiting until they were forced to walk hundreds of miles to their homes; the sweeping arrests of anti-CAA/NRC activists; the Hathras rape; up to the farm protests of late 2020-early 2021.

Each of these often-related events speak to a condition of thwarted and/or forced mobility. If NRC detention centres and prisons are architectures of violent incarceration, there is also a parallel series of forced migrations: of rural workers in and out of metropolitan cities; of violated Muslims leaving neighbourhoods

in north-east Delhi after the pogrom; farmers spending months at Delhi's borders surrounded by barbed wire and barricades. But there is also a matter of existential immobility: Where does one go, what does one do, when every act of resistance fails to have a political effect? The year 2020 was, it must be remembered, a year of extraordinarily popular resistance against the government. From Shaheen Bagh to Singhu–Tikri–Ghaziabad, the nation witnessed large community-based protests in a non-electoral political form, which was long assumed to be outmoded in a BJP-ruled India where opposition had shrunk to insignificance. Yet it would seem in retrospect that nothing came of these protests—neither CAA/NRC nor the farm laws have been repealed. Instead, many protestors have lost lives and livelihoods, been jailed, maimed or disappeared.

I struggled through much of the pandemic to make sense of these events, 'doomscrolling' in my home. Not long after fellow students from universities were arrested on false charges, left feeling particularly helpless and guilty, I watched *Paatal Lok* (created by Sudip Sharma; dir: Avinash Arun and Prosit Roy; 2020), an Amazon-produced web series released to great acclaim. Although cut from the same cloth as recent series, such as *Sacred Games* (dir: Anurag Kashyap, Vikramaditya Motwane, Neeraj Ghaywan; 2018–2019) or *The Family Man* (dir: Raj and DK; 2019–2021), my initial impressions were favourable as its political pessimism struck a chord with me. Yet, there was something unnerving: this pessimism came from the epiphany of a Delhi cop who was our voice of conscience! With memories of Delhi Police enabling the pogrom and the crackdowns on Jamia and JNU still fresh, it felt strange—even obscene—to be asked to share the perspective of a cop in a purportedly anti-establishment noir. I felt as if I had to unpack the political pessimism that had become the dominant structure of feeling in a supposedly critical, realist aesthetic in Indian cinema.[1]

Therefore, in this paper, I take *Paatal Lok* as a case to situate that which I call cynical realism against a genealogy of realist cinema in India. *Paatal Lok* is a good test case not only for its topicality, but also because its articulation of cynical realism is convincing, even poignant, whereas predecessors such as *Gulaal* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2009) or *Shanghai* (dir: Dibakar Banerjee; 2012) seem to falter. While these earlier films suggest that the messy political impasse in which we are trapped cannot be escaped, it is in *Paatal Lok* that

we receive the explicit cynical wisdom that one should not even try to change things—there is no outside.

Adapted from a 'true crime' novel by the now-infamous Tarun Tejpal, *Paatal Lok* is a policier that delves into the attempted assassination of prominent liberal journalist Sanjeev Mehra through the eyes of Hathiram Chaudhary, a middling cop eager for promotion. Although the police chief suggests that it is an open-and-shut case, Hathiram believes there is more to it than meets the eye. He embarks—with Ansari, a new police recruit—on an investigation that takes him deep into the murky underworld of Delhi and beyond in Chitrakoot, Uttar Pradesh, where he realises that Delhi Police is itself implicated in carrying out a hit for a deceitful regional politician. The investigation banks upon discovering the pasts—formative biographies—of the four undertrials who were caught red-handed (as it initially seems) by Delhi Police. Each of their lives opens up to one of the major political faultlines in India: caste, gender and sexuality, religious identity, etc. Yet, far from being minor subplots to the investigative narrative, these backstories open onto the thicket of power relations in which contemporary political subjectivity is caught. This is the reason for *Paatal Lok*'s critical acclaim. It strikes a chord with us, because it vividly narrates a sense of immobility and confusion that we as urban liberal viewers feel in trying to grasp hinterland realpolitik—with its profusion of caste interests, the stranglehold of religion, the persistence of feudal hierarchies, etc. Moreover, it articulates a reflexive self-critique, showing urban–liberal complicity in Hindutva, even if it ultimately exhausts the possibility of resistance and offers passivity as cynical wisdom.

In choosing the analytic of cynical realism, I intend, on one level, to point to this convergence of political pessimism with a now-dominant mode of cinematic realism that responds to the urgent crisis of life in a corporate Hindutva regime—where social violence through the domination of primitive capitalist relations, caste supremacy, Islamophobia and patriarchy are ambient social facts. Cynical realism gleefully borrows from the gritty thickness of this extra-textual 'real', while tracing modes of subjective orientation and accommodation of atomised individuals who are caught out of comfort in this milieu. With cynical realism, I thereby hope to propose an analog to what Mark Fisher has famously termed capitalist realism: a resignation of neo-liberal subjects towards the capitalist status quo, which is naturalised as inevitable (2009). Although Fisher's work informs me, I deviate from his largely psychoanalytic critique of the ruling ideology and its hegemonic reality principle. Instead, I try to situate cynical realism as the culmination of certain tendencies immanent to Indian film history: i.e., of realism as a developmental aesthetic, which, since the 1970s, has mutated into the cop film and the hinterland crime film. Attempting to show realism as an aesthetic ground for the articulation of developmentalist desires—typically a modern interventionist subject which wants to rid a backward, feudal hinterland of 'corruption'—I trace a genealogical arc by which this developmentalist desire is exhausted. Lastly, I suggest why turning away from analysing caste relations head-on contributes to this exhaustion and the consequent turn to cynicism.

PAATAL LOK AND THE DRAMA OF SOCIAL IM/MOBILITY

Paatal Lok exemplifies the new noir that developed with an 'alternative' turn in post-2000 Bombay cinema. It is unthinkable without the inventions in the narrative and spatial strategies of realism that films such as *Aamir* (dir: Raj Kumar Gupta; 2008), *Black Friday* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2004), *Ugly* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2013), or *Gulaal* brought into the mainstream. Their downbeat, gritty realism drew as much on crime writing and investigative journalism as on a new documentary sensibility that flourished more widely in popular culture as a result of digital video and ubiquitous media devices—intent on discovering the urban underbelly, its slums, ghettos and hinterlands.[2] The very milieu of the new Bombay noir is abuzz with the imploding excess of what Ravi Sundaram (2015) calls a 'post-postcolonial sensory economy', in which the old statist frame of governmentality can no longer contain public affects through regulated media usage and censorship, if the state is at all invested in such regulation. A certain quality of societal decay, corruption and collapse—above all, the pervasive threat of sudden violence—shapes the political unconscious of these films, imbuing them with urgency and dread.[3]

More broadly, these new noirs point towards a recent transnational turn in film noir, which takes the unravelling form of the investigation to allegorise the character of uneven modernisation (especially in the Global South, or sometimes the underdeveloped South of developed nations like the United States), dwelling on its

attendant social violence and traumas. The recent Turkish series *Sahsiyet* (Persona; dir: Onur Saylak; 2018), for example, has several similarities with *Paatal Lok*. In both, the narratives take the shape of the discovery of evil beyond glitzy facades of urban modernity through journeys to the heart of darkness in the ghetto, or even further back into the pre-modern feudal hinterland. Yet the naive protagonist, standing in for the spectator, discovers not just evil villains—individuals—but an entire machinery of malicious intent, whose puppet masters are often out of reach of the law, if not totally invisible. The investigation reveals a geography of im/mobility by suturing across a territory the many spaces through which licit and illicit movements of bodies and objects take place.[4] At the same time, we are made acutely aware of the boundaries and taboos on mobility in these spaces: not everyone can cross over, enter or leave. For one, we feel in our guts how out-of-place we would be in such spaces governed by obscure sovereign powers. The journey that the investigator undertakes on our behalf is then a transgression of spatial boundaries and taboos, providing us a cognitive map of the social totality in the metonymic form of an unveiled conspiracy.

Paatal Lok articulates this spatialisation of power and inequality in the quasi-mythical refrain of the 'three worlds'— heaven, earth, hell—that returns throughout the series. If Lutyens' Delhi is heaven, the Outer Jamuna Paar localities skirted by a polluted, over-silted Yamuna (Seelampur, Jaffrabad)[5] which Inspector Hathiram Chaudhary watches over sullenly, are hell. Settled largely by the migrant urban poor from western UP and Purvanchal, many of them Muslims and lower castes, Jamuna Paar is both materially and figuratively the other/outside of Lutyens' Delhi. Its otherness is underlined by the dehumanising 'vermin' tag used repeatedly to refer to the people of its ghettos. As Hathiram's first monologue knowingly admits, the job of the police is to maintain this separation of distinct 'worlds'. Anytime their spatial boundaries—governed by the caste logic of purity—are breached, misfortune ensues. A scandal occurs. Unerringly, the filmmakers show cops like Hathiram as inhabitants of *dharti lok*—areas like Vasant Vihar and R. K. Puram where 'people like us', the Hindu upper-caste middle-class, live. Although structured as an odyssey through hell, *Paatal Lok*'s moral centre lies firmly in the reassuring lifeworld of dharti lok, which acts as a normative middle ground.

By infusing well-worn tropes of post-liberalisation India into this spatial allegory—wealth and poverty, glamour and squalor, aspirations for success and its systemic limits—the makers of *Paatal Lok* invest much narrative pathos into the im/possibility of transcending these separated worlds. Every major character that we empathise with—Hathiram and his family; the Kashmiri Muslim Ansari; the 'criminals' Tope Singh, Kabir M., Cheeni, Vishal Tyagi—is caught in his private drama of climbing up the worlds, of being somewhere else other than the social station of his birth. The four accused are in particular all desperately looking to escape their imposed identities. But, as we see in Kabir's and Cheeni's cases, these identities thwart their desire for mobility. Although Kabir hides his Muslim identity to save himself from mob lynching (which killed his brother), and Cheeni, a Nepali-origin transwoman, seeks gender-affirming surgery, they are falsely branded by the state as an ISI-funded terrorist and a Nepali sleeper agent 'pretending to be a woman', respectively. Not only are their disavowed identities used against them, they are assigned a transnational mobility they can only wish they had.

This drama of social im/mobility is also constantly haunted by the threat of a sudden, violent loss of status: a free fall. Everyone lives in an invisible cage of hierarchical social relations, pulled about by its gravitational forces. When Hathiram's son Siddhu shocks his elite school by brandishing a stolen gun, the entire middle-class lifeworld cocooning his family is threatened with disintegration. Even though this familial drama of middle-class respectability is peripheral to the main narrative, it is the matrix through which we gaze upon the social whole. It provides the relief, for example, against which the writers emphasise the obscenity of powerful Lutyens' elites like the star newsman Sanjeev Mehra, who casually sacrifices the have-nots for private gain. Although a former critic of the right-wing government, Mehra cynically parrots the state's narrative on primetime news to boost his ratings, condemning the four undertrials in his attempted assassination case as Pak-funded terrorists.

Against this state narrative, Hathiram's investigation assumes the left-liberal mantle of critique intended by the writers. It takes us from Lutyens' Delhi's insular world of posh mansions and conference rooms into a wider geography of migration and

im/mobility in the hinterlands, revealing a violent feudal political order that the metropolitan elite depends upon but disavows. Rather than incriminating the undertrials, the investigation makes them subjects of empathy, as if carrying out the task of left-liberal journalists who, as Mehra quips, always feel an urge to humanise a Muslim, Dalit or transgender criminal. Although meant to be ironic, the quip feels strange as *Paatal Lok*'s writers are themselves too calculated in articulating their sociological critique. Not only do they assemble the most intersectional array of subaltern criminals in recent noir—a Dalit, a Muslim, and a trans person among them—we get a glimpse into their lives exclusively through the prying eyes of an upper-caste cop. The paradox of mounting a left-liberal critique through a police investigation is not lost on *Paatal Lok*'s writers, who have to therefore naturalise this anomaly in the narrative structure. On the one hand, the lives of undertrials are effectively rendered immobile once they are in jail. They are passive subjects open to scrutiny, to our sympathy, but robbed of active agency: their formative events have already happened in the past, waiting to be discovered. On the other hand, Hathiram, the cop, is made a naive truth-seeker oblivious to the stakes of his quest, unaware of its realpolitik.

Yet, this structural anomaly in the investigation-as-critique becomes even more obvious once *Paatal Lok* zeroes in on caste: the social fact/structure that freezes all social mobility and overdetermines all relations. The writers certainly wish to make a pithy comment by centring caste relations in the hinterland in the two most salient subplots on Tope Singh and Vishal Tyagi; but this is where their critique exhausts itself. Although Tope Singh, a rebellious Dalit youth from rural Punjab who escapes to Delhi to dodge retribution from landowning Jats, would make a more impactful protagonist if the intent was to take an anti-caste perspective, the writers centre Tyagi in the 'deep narrative' to such an extent that the other three undertrials nearly drop out of sight. Once it zeroes in on his backstory, *Paatal Lok* suddenly abandons sociological critique for an old-fashioned psychological study of the enigmatic contract killer, Tyagi. A devoted hitman of the private militia headed by the Bundelkhandi bandit Donullia Gujjar, the writers even anoint Tyagi as a pariah, living out of his Kurmi caste community, through the low-caste mythos of Eklavya.

As such, any possibility of anti-caste politics is soon foreclosed as abortive, if not deceitful. So, on the one hand, an assertive Dalit leader in rural Punjab, modelled on Chandrashekhar Azad, is killed off too soon.[6] On the other, a political movement/party in the BSP mould—tellingly named Dalit Samaj Party—is figured as eyewash for cynical power play by a deceitful Brahmin politician, its followers no more than a mindless mob. Since these possibilities for political change have been foreclosed, *Paatal Lok* completes its ideological work by offering viewers the consolation of an unveiled conspiracy. The plan to kill Sanjeev Mehra, we learn, had nothing to do with national politics. While Hindi cinema has steadily become 'provincialised' in recent years with a renewed focus on provincial hinterlands (in lieu of the big city), the denouement in *Paatal Lok* is that the Nation constantly evoked in the grand political discourse of the metropole—including in primetime news of Mehra's variety—does not exist at all. Delhi, we are told, only acts as a smokescreen for the 'real scene' of provincial politics in the hinterland. This is *Paatal Lok*'s grand critique, its unveiling of the vacuous pompousness of the metropole-centred discourse of hyper-nationalism.

But its payoff is that all collective politics is exhausted, the caste status quo confirmed as totally unshakeable. One merely gets a map of the conspiratorial totality—a clear-eyed view of the puppet masters and enablers—even though nothing can be done. In fact, as *Paatal Lok*'s writers seem to suggest, any attempt to shake things up is only going to embarrass the naive revolutionary or truth-seeker—better to accept the 'genius of the system' and learn how to play by its rules. For all of Hathiram's valiant efforts to unearth the truth, it matters little here: the impersonal *system* is always greater than the sum of all its human cogs. It is, as the top cop says, a 'well-oiled machine' with its own cunning. As if to rub in the status-quoist irony, Hathiram learns that the reason he is getting his police job back is that he inadvertently restored the cosmic balance in Chitrakoot politics. All Hathiram can do with his knowledge of *the* truth is to take his proper place in the world, which is, after all, the system stripped of all illusions. Is it surprising that, for *Paatal Lok*'s writers, caste is unsurpassable? No other logic demands this acute resignation and subservience to one's proper place in the system.

CYNICAL REALISM: THE END OF REALISM AS PROGRESSIVE AESTHETIC?

We have then, in *Paatal Lok*, a succinct culmination of a recent aesthetic in Hindi cinema—what I call cynical realism. Characterised by an overarching political cynicism and the topical, realist desire to respond to the contemporary, this aesthetic suffuses many genres, gaining full expression particularly in the noir or thriller. Although a series like *Paatal Lok* can be seen as part of a Global South trend in noir, its particular antecedents, I want to argue now, belong to a specifically Indian lineage of filmic realism and its articulation of developmentalist desires. It is remarkable that cynical realism arrives at that very historical moment when a long-remarked realism deficit in Indian cinema is overcome. Yet with realism going mainstream, it is now emptied of its political potentials: its prior association with progressive worldviews. Although a full treatment is out of bounds here, I will briefly trace the genealogy of cynical realism by attending to the debate on realism as a developmentalist aesthetic and its mediations/afterlives in the cop film and hinterland crime film.

In the standard telling, realism as a historically specific aesthetic form is inextricable from the desacralisation of the world by modern capitalism (Biswas, 2002). This enables two of its prime conditions of possibility: the emergence of, respectively, rationalised space (through monocular perspective) and properly historical, secular time (through the novel) (ibid.: 5–6). Yet realism does not appear in one uniform, universal move all across the world. Given that realist painting and the novel emerged in the European context and spread through colonialism, realism in the postcolony has always been a vexed question, centred on the particularities of negotiating Western modernity. The postcolonial argument has been that since the colonised world did not organically experience the processes of democratisation and secularisation that gave birth to realism, its adoption could only have been an imperfect mimicry of a more authentic, ideal Western articulation. And while postcolonial critics often elide this point, we should also note that the emergence of desacralised space–time in India was, quite fundamentally, predicated on loosening the hold of caste-ritual values in representational codes. The transition in Indian realism—from symbolically pre-invested 'enumerated spaces' to more open-ended exploratory 'elaborated spaces' (or locations)—was enabled largely by the ethos of nationalist reconstruction dominant in the

1940s and 1950s, which significantly reduced the grip of caste-ritual codes in the design and use of urban homes and public spaces (Biswas, 2017). This was, unsurprisingly, the golden era of the urban adventure–romance.

Although one ought to be wary of aligning realism with teleologies of the modernisation theory, Moinak Biswas proposes that we chart a dialectical 'developmental map' of realism attentive to its negotiations in various postcolonial contexts across genres, regions, eras, etc. (2002: 15). I am sympathetic to this critical agenda. Nonetheless, one cannot do this without attending to developmentalist biases, desires and anxieties—themselves teleological—loaded into the term 'realism' in Indian discursive contexts. For discourses on realism here have always been about *our* stage of development. Have we developed enough as audiences and filmmakers to learn a 'proper' film style? Have we developed a robust, modern consciousness attentive to Indian reality? Madhava Prasad detects in these questions a structural issue: the formation of a modern citizen–subject, who is the ideal addressee of realist cinema and to whom realism is contiguous with a secular, liberal–social contract (1998). As Prasad shows, this is how the reformist Nehruvian state saw the 'problem' of realism when it condemned popular films for frivolity and excess. While the New Wave that emerged from the state's policy for supporting a 'parallel cinema' is considerably complex once we consider its avant-garde practitioners, one of its major legacies was in fact an explicit statist reconfiguration of realism as a developmentalist aesthetic, particularly in the films of directors such as Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihalani and Prakash Jha.

For Prasad, the hallmark of the developmentalist aesthetic is that its desire for social change runs up against the limits of what he calls India's 'passive revolution'. This aesthetic, Prasad argues, is a symptom of the coalitional compromise in the field of national politics where organic socio-political revolution on such issues as land redistribution, abolition of feudal-caste privileges, dismantling of gendered hierarchies, is perpetually scuttled in favour of a 'revolution from above' entrusted to a reformist state and conscientious civil society. But since reformist elements are themselves largely composed of feudal elites and modernised *savarna* castes (i.e., those within the four-fold caste system) that had benefited from colonial education, trades and bureaucratic

jobs, the caste status quo is maintained. Revolutionary desire, Prasad argues, could be articulated in developmental realism, then, only in terms of various compensatory acts of outrage. The typical scene of this confrontation with feudalism is the rural hinterland, which metonymises the discontents of Indian democracy. As Prasad suggests, the liberal citizen subject—the idealised spectator of developmental realism—experiences the rural feudal order as if from a distance, even though he is intimately embedded within it (1998: 193). The function of the developmental realist aesthetic is to introduce a distance between the feudal-caste order and the naive, 'unmarked' (i.e., caste/class-less) liberal spectator who looks into the feudal world voyeuristically—with confusion, morbid attraction and secret disgust—as if he has torn free of feudalism's arcane, violent logics in the process of becoming modern.

Developmental realism depended largely, then, on figures who mediated between the demarcated worlds of the modern–urban and the rural–feudal orders: typically, as Prasad shows, these were figures from the city caught out of place in the countryside. In the paradigmatic form, this mediation occurred via the mobilised bureaucrat, such as in Shyam Benegal's *Manthan* (1976). Yet, the loss of idealism after the Emergency meant that this simplistic equation of city/country and modern/feudal could not be long sustained in topically realist cinema. Corruption and vestiges of feudalism were now to be found unmistakably in the city and its political–state nexus. Whereas earlier films saw the bureaucracy and police as agents of change, in the new cycle of developmental realism this was not tenable anymore. With *Ardh Satya* (dir: Govind Nihalani; 1983), the motivated bureaucrat would morph into the figure of the angry, righteous male cop fighting against a fundamentally corrupt police and political system. But, if the militant bureaucrat in *Manthan* could catalyse an 'organic' rural political collective of Dalits, the cop of *Ardh Satya* was now an irrevocably lone vigilante fighting the corrupt system. The possibility of collective politics was foreclosed, as the claustrophobia of being trapped in the *system* became channelled into the cop's increasingly violent reactions to masculine anxieties about impotence. The young cop's battle against the system was, however, already prefigured in oedipal antagonism—a dominating feudal father who forced him to become a cop by the inexorable logic of caste.

In the cop films that followed two decades after *Ardh Satya*—*Shool* (dir: Eeshwar Nivas; 1999), *Ab Tak Chhappan* (dir: Shimit Amin; 2004), *Gangaajal* (dir: Prakash Jha; 2003)—this drama of impotence culminated repeatedly in the mythification of torture and the 'encounter' as necessary measures for maintaining order (Basu, 2010). The traces of ambiguity in *Ardh Satya's* Anand Velankar were erased, along with the implicit realisation of being captive to the prison of caste and patriarchy. This happened just as the metropole–hinterland relationship was remade from a paternalistic Nehruvian agrarian imaginary into an abstruse formulation of lawless 'jungle raj' harbouring India's enemies, both 'internal' and 'external'. The new cop film's motto was to clean up this messy hinterland. As Arunima Paul demonstrates, turn-of-the-millennium 'national' and 'provincial' cop films—*Sarfarosh* (dir: John Matthew Matthan; 1999), *Khakee* (dir: Rajkumar Santoshi; 2004), *Shool*, *Gangaajal*, etc.—were ideological responses to the 1990s moment of Mandal–mandir–liberalisation. In these films, the hinterland's political order is deliberately divorced from any reading of the rural political economy founded on unequal flows, resource and labour extraction (Paul, 2014: 81). Although they occasionally admit to the caste nexus prevalent in the hinterland, it is refracted most often through the eyes of a righteous cop who resents identity-based politics as a hurdle to the development of a properly 'meritorious' nation. In its most extreme form, electoral politics is dismissed as such: the cop articulating the authoritarian desire of a police state unimpeded by corrupt legislatures, ineffective courts and a naive civil society.

Paul rightly locates this post-political, post-identity positioning of the cop in the aspirations of the Hindu nouveau middle class that climbed up the social ladder in the wake of liberalisation, making the shift from 'traditional' upper-caste elites of Tier–III cities/towns to new white-collar professionals of the metropoles. For these economic migrants, the spectacle of the righteous cop film allowed, on the one hand, an enjoyment of the patois and performative excess of the provincial small town: a relief from what Akshaya Kumar calls the 'architectural indifference' of the metropolitan multiplex-mall (2013). But the cop's righteous disgust for hinterland politics also allowed an internal distancing from one's class or regional origins: an affirmation of social mobility—'progress'

through 'hard work' and 'merit'—from jungle raj to the well-regulated global city. The new cop films would soon segue into a cycle of crime films centred on colourful provincial masculinities in the north Indian hinterland—*Haasil* (dir: Tigmanshu Dhulia; 2003), *Omkara* (dir: Vishal Bhardwaj; 2006), *Gangs of Wasseypur* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2012), *Ishqiya* (dir: Abhishek Chaubey; 2010), *Gulaal*, etc. Even as these latter films distanced themselves from any grand righteous moralism, they built the hinterland world upon the 'representational accumulation' of existing tropes of a lawless order already established by the cop film (Biswas, 2006). The hinterland became a simulacral complement to the global metropolis, crucial to the subjective self-making of a new migrant middle class (Kumar, 2013; Bhaumik, 2016).

Paatal Lok concludes this genealogy of developmental realism by building on the ideologemes of these past genre cycles, even when it reneges on their vigilantist or reformist ethos. For one, much as in the old developmental realism, it redoubles the distance between the metropole and hinterland, and between Delhi's various class/caste-governed spaces, by marking them as separated 'worlds'. As Madhava Prasad notes, the function of 1970s developmentalist realism was to hide a continuum by marking the feudal-caste order as a world entirely separate from the urban–modern (1998). Although *Paatal Lok* traces many subterranean transactions between these worlds, it reinforces the axiom that one cannot traverse between them without a special go-between, thus making the cop a privileged proxy figure who allows viewers to access these worlds otherwise opaque to an outsider's gaze.

Second, *Paatal Lok* takes up the atomised perspective of the conscientious cop fighting a corrupt system from cop films of the 2000s era, foreclosing any possibility of collective politics.[7] Its defeatism regarding anti-caste mass struggles is paradoxical, given that its spatial allegory of the three worlds is evidently governed by this very caste order. Since it doubles down on the reified tropes of the hinterland as a lawless, archaic feudal order, it can only offer viewers the consolation of the lone cop—Hathiram—uncovering a conspiracy which implicates even the Delhi Police chief. We get a neat cognitive map of the social whole out of the messy turmoil of mass politics. But since the writers realise the paradox inherent in making a Delhi Police officer the voice of conscience, they position

Hathiram as an underdog—a flawed but essentially good man—who must come to terms with his naivete. Political defeat is compensated finally by cynical wisdom, with the drama of non-concealment—the revelation of left-liberal hypocrisies—and a surrender to the 'genius of the system', however rotten.

Ultimately, the cynical realism of *Paatal Lok* has less to do with any aesthetic agenda than with the realism of political theory: the ideological credo that moral agendas merely cloud the motivated self-interests of atomised sovereigns who all act according to the immutable, bleak laws of human nature professed by Hobbes or Machiavelli. While in film or narrative theory realism implies an openness towards the world—a welcoming attitude to the contingency that follows from the emergence of desacralised space–time—the turn towards cynical realism represents a fatalistic, overdetermined closure of the world. Steve Neale argues that genres are constituted in part by systems of expectation, which produce coherent genre-effects, making a spectator 'believe' in the plausibility of a narrative world by virtue of its verisimilitude (2000). There are two kinds of verisimilitude, Neale argues: first, the pre-established 'rules of the genre' (generic verisimilitude); second, a larger cultural/social verisimilitude, which makes a text legible according to the social norms and received public opinions of a historical culture. While cynical realism makes a privileged claim for cultural verisimilitude—promising us immediate contact with the socio-political fabric of India under Hindutva—the key critical manoeuvre is to unpack the constructedness of this 'claim to reality'. It is to show the many tropes of generic verisimilitude that sanction or prohibit possible narrative paths in a film/series such as *Paatal Lok*. Often, when one judges how real a film feels, one tends to foreclose this live connection with possibility that is crucial to remaking reality. Instead, 'realness' or verisimilitude is adjudged according to sedimented habits of being, of acting in a given situation, without any way out of a political paralysis.

So even when *Paatal Lok* offers us a cognitive map of the totality through the heroic effort of the individual witness—the cop—this mapping has a 'stultifying effect...[*Paatal Lok*'s writers make] it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or

teller' (Sedgwick, 2003: 124). It must be remembered that cognitive mapping is not merely a question of having a totalising view of the system; it is a situated intervention into concrete social reality. But as *Paatal Lok* writes out anti-caste struggles, which could allow such a situated cognitive mapping of the feudal-caste order, its auteurs can only offer the cynical consolation of becoming wise to the status quo. The intended critical bite in *Paatal Lok* is wasted as the unveiled conspiracy merely confirms what we know all along. The essentially conservative assumptions of the police procedural genre are not challenged. The cop's gaze—through which we see the narrative world—is not problematised for its investment in power or stripped of its presumed innocence. Neither is the naïve cop's journey relativised, made just one of several narrative strands within a much larger social force-field—as opposed to its privileged locus of discovery.

Cynical realism is, in this sense, a coming-to-terms with the impasse that traps liberal critique into a hopeless self-reflexivity, a total surrender to the modern cynicism which has eroded critique of its sharp, negative charge. Modern cynicism is the 'enlightened false consciousness' of the masses, as Peter Sloterdijk puts it, an ethic in which the Enlightenment critique of false consciousness has matured into a disposition of detached obedience to the status quo (1987: 5). New knowledge no longer leads to a decrease in fear, the repelling of darkness. Instead, it contributes to the crippling fear of overexposure. Our discovery of the truth in *Paatal Lok*—via Hathiram—only serves as an injunction to fit within the apathetic system, 'not [be] taken for suckers' (ibid.: 5). 'A new form of realism bursts forth, a form that is driven by the fear of becoming deceived or overpowered' (ibid.: 330).

CONCLUSION: ON SCREENS AND INTERFACIAL PASSIVITY

What *Paatal Lok* achieves, even if unconsciously, is remarkable. With it, a trajectory of developmental realism, the purpose of which was to critique and course-correct India's political system, comes to terms with a total annihilation of any openness to the future. If this reformist desire was compromised in any case because of its obfuscation of the continuities between the feudal-caste order and modern liberal–democratic system, with *Paatal Lok* we have taken a full U-turn towards cynical foreclosure. In the final

instance, cynical realism might well be the aesthetic choice of a modern consciousness that has not come to terms with its intimate, but disavowed, relation to caste, and which cannot, therefore, envision a common world beyond caste-based dominations and segmentations.

I leave the reader with an afterthought, even though I cannot fully explore it here for dearth of space. The apparent domination of cynical realism in Indian cinema and, especially, OTT-based web series like *Paatal Lok* points, I think, to a larger problem of political subjectivity in the contemporary media regime. I could not help notice that I saw *Paatal Lok* on the same interface/screen where I spent so much time 'doomscrolling' through the events of 2020. There is, I believe, a shared ethos between the interfacial passivity encouraged by our screens and the cynical realism of the now-dominant OTT content. This is precipitated, for one, by the black-boxed nature of algorithmic interfaces, which reify a whole range of social interactions into a few clicks and gestures, thereby converting sociality into mere utility.[8] Everything can be delivered straight to our homes with an app today, particularly during this pandemic. Yet the converse of this condition is that we—urban, upper-caste, liberal users—are even more cut off from the thick sociality of the lived world, helpless once we are forced to navigate it. The networked interface thereby redoubles the caste-based spatial segmentation—the separation of worlds—that *Paatal Lok* proposes as an unshakeable system. Overcoming this interfacial passivity requires, among other things, grappling with the very aesthetic—cynical realism—which inures us to the political contradictions of these times. This is what my paper sets out to do as a first step.

◆

NOTES

1. Although *Paatal Lok* is a web series, I read it more in a continuum with recent Indian narrative cinema than such prior forms as TV soap operas/dramas. While there are undoubtedly continuities—in terms of their serial logics—between traditional television and such recent 'quality television' content as *Paatal Lok*, *Sacred Games* or *The Family Man*, I draw on the fact that OTT channels, such as Netflix and Amazon, have chosen a conscious strategy of 'cinematising' their prestige offerings by roping in such critically acclaimed filmmakers as Anurag

Kashyap, Raj and DK, or Prosit Roy. There is a danger here of lapsing into an uncritical heuristic that merely confirms 'the logic of distinction' used by OTT corporations, but I hope to show that the lineages of gritty realism being claimed by these filmmakers—more authentic or real than run-of-the-mill melodrama—have a specifically cinematic lineage.

2. The influence, on this 'alternative Bombay cinema', of crime and non-fiction writing about the discontents of post-liberalisation urban India—especially Bombay/Mumbai—cannot be understated here. Notable here are such books as Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City*, Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games*, Gyan Prakash's *Mumbai Fables*, Katharine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*, Gregory David Roberts' *Shantaram* and the gangland chronicles of S. Hussain Zaidi. Many of these have been adapted into film/TV; others have more widely shaped the grammar and archetypes of urban crime cinema.

3. Moinak Biswas notes that 'the strongest evocation of a place' in films such as *Aamir* or *Black Friday* specifically happen when they invest particular locations with the charged presence of an othered ethnic community, such as the Muslim ghetto in the big city (2017). The location then gains a particular semiotic saturation, a haptic hyperrealism, via an exploration of the seemingly opaque, labyrinthine ghetto where an 'inscrutable' 'suspicious' community lives—secretly conspiring with each other, eliding the outsider's gaze. Biswas draws an especially stark contrast of this Islamophobic 'communalisation' of location (placeness) in recent thrillers against the 1950s moment of emergence of 'elaborated space' (i.e., location) from symbolic 'enumerated space' in realist socials. While that earlier transition happened through the urban adventure–romance through which characters negotiated vernacular citizenship—breaking away from their primitive communal identities—the closure of progressive political horizons returns the community as a distinctive, threatening qualifier of certain locations. On the Islamophobia of these new thrillers and their unfolding against a discourse of terrorism and communal strife, also see Tanvir (2010) and Mazumdar (2011).

4. In *Black Friday,* the Hindi film where the elements of this new thriller form first coalesced, the investigation leads us, on the one hand, to transnational links across India, Pakistan and the Middle East that sustain Bombay's historic Arabian sea trade and, on the other, to the movement of subaltern Muslim populations from small villages and towns in northern and western India to Bombay's slums and Muslim ghettoes.

5. These neighbourhoods in fact suffered most in the Delhi pogrom. The cruel irony in one of the episodes being named 'Sleepless in Seelampur' is hard to ignore in the aftermath of February 2020.

6. This plot point is dismayingly shared with another recent 'caste issue film made by a savarna director, *Article 15*. There Nishad, Azad-like, is initially an ally for the righteous cop Ayan Ranjan (a Brahmin who positions himself above caste-identity); yet the cloying 'victory of justice' won by Ayan *for* the Dalits cannot happen without the sacrificial killing of Nishad—as if to clear the way. No deep symptomatic reading is needed to answer why savarna filmmakers kill off fictional proxies of Chandrashekhar Azad whenever they have to respond to urgent caste issues.

7. Here, *Paatal Lok* is far from alone among recent films/web series to downplay collective struggles as a prelude to articulating a cynical–realist attitude to political change via the cop/bureaucrat. I can think of especially *Shanghai* and, in a slightly different light, *Newton* as variants of this formula. A more tone-deaf iteration is *Article 15*.

8. There is a growing amount of work on these hidden thick social substrates (often racialised, gendered, etc.) of the app and gig economies, which are often obscured by the hype of AI and smart devices/interfaces. See, for example, Crawford and Joler (2018). On networked and interfacial passivity, see Matviyenko (2015).

REFERENCES

Basu, Anustup. 2010. 'Encounters in the City: Cops, Criminals, and Human Rights in Hindi Film', *Journal of Human Rights*, 9 (2): 175–90.

Bhaumik, Kaushik. 2016. 'Migration and Contemporary Indian Cinema: A Consideration of Anurag Kashyap and *la politique des auteurs* in the Times of Globalization', in Seung-hoon Jeong and Jeremi Szaniawski (eds.), *The Global Auteur: The Politics of Authorship in 21st Century Cinema*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic: 287–302.

Biswas, Moinak. 2017. 'From Space to Location', *positions*, 25 (1): 9–28.

———. 2006. 'Mourning and Blood-Ties: Macbeth in Mumbai', *Journal of the Moving Image*, 5: 1–9.

———. 2002. 'Historical Realism: Modes of Modernity in Indian Cinema, 1940–60.' Unpublished PhD thesis. Monash University.

Crawford, Kate and Joler, Vladan. 2018. 'Anatomy of an AI System: The Amazon Echo as an Anatomical Map of Human Labor, Data and Planetary Resources', *AI Now Institute and Share Lab*, 7 September. https://anatomyof.ai.

Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is there no Alternative?* Winchester, UK: Zero Books.

Kumar, Akshaya. 2013. 'Provincialising Bollywood? Cultural Economy of North Indian Small-town Nostalgia in the Indian Multiplex', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 11 (1): 61–74.

Matviyenko, Svitlana. 2015. 'Interpassive User: Complicity and the Returns of Cybernetics', *The Fibreculture Journal*, 25: 133–61.

Mazumdar, Ranjani. 2011. 'Terrorism, Conspiracy, and Surveillance in Bombay's Urban Cinema', *Social Research*, 78 (1): 143–72.

Neale, Steve. 2000. *Genre and Hollywood*. London and New York: Routledge.

Paul, Arunima. 2014. 'Unraveling Countrysides: Provincial Modernities in Contemporary Popular Indian Cinema.' Unpublished PhD thesis. University of Southern California.

Prasad, M. Madhava. 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi: OUP.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is about You.' *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press: 123–51.

Sloterdijk, Peter. 1987. *Critique of Cynical Reason*. Trans. by Michael Eldred. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Sundaram, Ravi. 2015. 'Post-postcolonial Sensory Infrastructure', *e-flux journal*, 64. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/64/60858/post-postcolonial-sensory-infrastructure/. Accessed on 30 March 2021.

Tanvir, Kuhu. 2010. 'Myth, Legend, Conspiracy: Urban Terror in *Aamir* and *Delhi–6*', in Monica Narula, Shuddhabrata Sengupta and Jeebesh Bagchi (eds.), *Sarai Reader 08: Fear*. Delhi: Centre for the Study of Developing Societies: 248–53.

❖❖

'IT NEEDS TO BE MORE LIKE A HINDI FILM'
Dubbing Hollywood in India

TEJASWINI GANTI

What do *The Jungle Book, Avengers: Infinity War, The Lion King, Avengers: Endgame, Spiderman: Far from Home, Captain Marvel* and *Fast & Furious: Hobbs & Shaw* all have in common? Aside from the obvious fact of being Hollywood releases (mostly from Disney), these seven films were amongst the highest grossing *Hindi* films in India from 2016 to 2019. While dubbed Hindi versions of Hollywood films have been releasing in India since the mid-1990s, it is only since 2012 that they have been making a noticeable impact at the box office. The Indian and international media took note in 2016 when Disney's *The Jungle Book*, released on 8 April, became the highest grossing Hollywood film ever in India—earning an estimated $38.2 million across 1,640 screens, with 58 per cent of these revenues being generated from the dubbed versions in Hindi, Telugu and Tamil (Bhushan, 2016; Busch, 2016; Cain, 2016; Jha, 2016; KPMG, 2017; Ramachandran, 2016; Rapoza, 2016). In fact, the Hindi dubbed version of *The Jungle Book* earned more than most Hindi films produced by the Bombay film industry that year, and was classified as a 'Super-Duper Hit' in the trade magazine *Film Information*'s 2016 box office report, with only two other films surpassing it in terms of commercial success (*Film Information,* 2017: 9).

The Jungle Book's record was then surpassed by the Hindi dub of *Avengers: Endgame*, which turned out to be the most profitable Hindi film of 2019, deemed a 'blockbuster' by *Film Information*. The Ernst & Young–Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) Report of 2018 pointed out that the box office collection of Hollywood films was 13 per cent of the total theatrical

Hindi poster of *Jungle Book*

box office in India, whereas in the past it was only about 4–5 per cent (2018: 79). This increase is definitely a result of the greater number of dubbed films released in the country. Dubbing allows Hollywood studios to broaden their audience base in India, which leads to increased overall revenues from the Indian market.

Rather than seeing dubbed Hollywood films as threats to the Hindi film industry (Bhushan, 2017; Chatterjee, 1999; Sehgal, 2010; Gupta, 2015), I argue that Hollywood's success in India is actually dependent upon Bollywood. Simply dubbing a Hollywood film into Hindi is not sufficient for its successful circulation in India. Hindi cinema, the Bombay film industry's production, distribution and exhibition infrastructure, along with social media and digital platforms, all play a crucial role in the increased visibility and viability of dubbed Hollywood films in India. Based on fieldwork in a dubbing studio in Mumbai in 2016 and 2018, as well as interviews with voice artists, scriptwriters, dubbing directors and local managers of Hollywood studios in India, this article details how the dubbing of Hollywood films into Hindi transforms an alien and foreign product into a familiar local one. Rather than a focus on the film text, I focus on the political economy and production process of dubbing Hollywood films to illustrate the significant level of decision-making in India and the critical role played by Indian dubbing professionals. To support my argument, I first provide an overview of the presence of dubbed Hollywood content in India, explaining the factors that determine whether a film is dubbed for the Indian market. Then, I discuss how dubbing Hollywood content into Hindi relies on Bollywood's production and distribution infrastructure. Examining the political economy of dubbed Hollywood films in India thus reveals a much more complex picture that disrupts simple binaries, such as 'foreign/domestic' or 'global/local'.

DUBBING HOLLYWOOD IN INDIA

While Hollywood films have had a presence in India for decades, both in their original English versions as well as sporadically in dubbed forms in the 1940s and 1950s (Govil, 2015; Rajadhyaksha and Willemen, 1999), the unexpected commercial success of the Hindi dub of *Jurassic Park* in 1994—categorised as a 'Super Hit' by *Film Information*—took the Indian media by surprise and seemed to offer a new opportunity for Hollywood to gain a larger foothold in India. The changed regulatory framework with economic liberalisation, along with the removal of restrictions against dubbing by various state governments altered the media landscape, paving the way for an increase in dubbed Hollywood content (Govil, 2015).[1] However, other Hollywood films such as *Speed, True Lies* and

Schindler's List that were dubbed into Hindi and released soon after were unable to replicate *Jurassic Park*'s success.

During my fieldwork in the Hindi film industry in 1996, the success of *Jurassic Park* was regarded as an anomaly, rather than a harbinger of Hollywood's growing dominance within the Indian market. The late Rajjat Barjatya, the director of marketing for Rajshri Films, responded to my question about whether the success of *Jurassic Park* was regarded as a threat by stating:

> That didn't shake us in the least. It didn't, because *Jurassic Park* is a once-in-a-lifetime film and there have been at least 20 films which have failed miserably.…*Jurassic Park* is a very different film. People came for the curiosity. You know what is a dinosaur? And how has a Hollywood film been dubbed for the first time in Hindi? There was a curiosity value attached to it—that's no longer the case.[2]

Throughout much of the late 1990s, the number of dubbed Hollywood films released theatrically in India were few and far between. In fact, it is not until the mid-2000s with the expansion of multiplexes that one finds a consistent presence of dubbed Hollywood films in the Indian theatrical landscape. All of the local representatives of the Hollywood majors I spoke to agreed that the increasing number of multiplex screens undeniably helped to broaden Hollywood's presence in India. India, however, suffers from a severe shortage of screens relative to its population and filmmaking output. While exact numbers are hard to pin down, media and consulting reports peg the total number of screens in India to be anywhere between 8,100–9,000, of which a quarter are multiplexes. Therefore, a challenge that Hollywood studios face in India is a battle for real estate in terms of screen time. S. Kumar, Senior Vice President heading domestic theatrical distribution for Fox Star Studios, India, related during our interview how his American colleague Kurt Rieder, Executive Vice President, Theatrical Distribution for Asia Pacific–20th Century Fox International, 'keeps mentioning in every presentation, "We are not competing with Hindi, we are competing with 20 languages over there!".'[3] Kumar added, 'Holding on to the screens is becoming more challenging for every language.'[4]

Another significant change from the 1990s has to do with the timing of Hollywood releases. While *Jurassic Park* opened in India 10 months after its release in the United States, starting in 2005 some Hollywood films were released in India either on, or close to, the same day they were in the United States. Kumar explained that the temporal lag that used to mark the release of Hollywood films in India was a consequence of the Central Board of Film Certification's rules governing the application for imported films. He explained:

> There was a rule in censorship that you need to get a *Variety* review or from some certain magazines that were listed. You had to get one of those reviews as part of the application. Only then you could get an English movie censored. Once that was removed, the day–date started happening.[5]

Kumar also pointed out that the move away from celluloid prints to digital distribution made it much easier for the simultaneous release of Hollywood films in India. Currently, nearly all Hollywood films that are distributed in India either release on the same date as in the United States, or sometimes even before their US release date.

YouTube and Facebook have been critical to expanding the presence of dubbed Hollywood films in the Indian media landscape by serving as key platforms for publicising and promoting the films. Dubbing studios receive trailers to dub into Hindi well before they receive the film and script to adapt. These trailers are released on YouTube through the official channels of the Indian divisions of the Hollywood majors in an effort to build up anticipation for, and interest in, a film. The number of likes and comments posted about the trailer then become part of the marketing and promotion of the film.

Not all Hollywood films released theatrically in India are dubbed, however.[6] According to the 2017 Media and Entertainment Industry Report, published by KPMG, about 40 per cent of Hollywood releases were dubbed into at least one Indian language, usually Hindi (2017). The proportion of a studio's yearly slate that is dubbed varies by studio. From my interviews, I learned that Disney dubs seven of the 10 films that they release annually, while Universal and Warner Bros. dub only about 3–5 films of the 15–20 films released yearly in India. When I asked managers of the Indian divisions of Disney, Fox, Universal and Warner Bros. about who decides which films should be dubbed for the Indian market, they all said that they make that decision in India, rather than it being

decided for them in Los Angeles. The criteria for deciding which films to dub for theatrical release is based upon a combination of box office precedent, language ideologies and audience imaginaries (Ganti, 2021b), which are themselves usually produced by box office outcomes (Ganti, 2012). The consensus across the various studios is that large theatrical spectacles manifest in action franchises such as *Fast & Furious*; superhero franchises such as *The Avengers*,
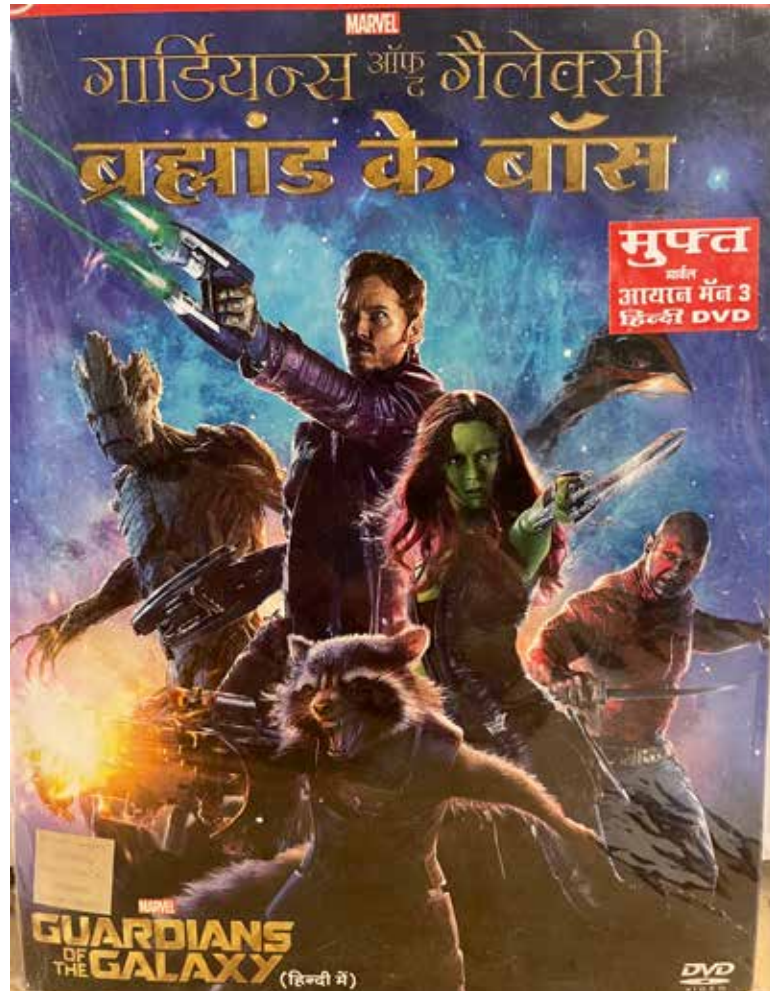
Hindi poster of *Guardians of the Galaxy*

X-Men, Spiderman and *Batman;* horror movies; and predator movies such as the *Jurassic Park* series, *Godzilla*, *The Meg*—what Komal Bhatia, Senior Manager for Operations at Warner Bros. Pictures, India, termed as the 'monsters'—are the ones that do well in their dubbed versions. Comedies, dramas and romantic comedies are deemed to have too specific a cultural milieu, and too much dialogue to be able to be translated and dubbed successfully.

When it came to the box office potential of animated films, I encountered differing perspectives based on the studio. Unlike the earlier-mentioned genres, animation is generally deemed a riskier proposition in India, and representatives of Universal and Disney explained that they made their decisions based on the particulars of the film, and if part of a franchise, one that had the potential to cultivate a loyal audience. A member of the Disney India team pointed out that although animated films only contributed 15–20 per cent of the revenue earned from dubbed films, they were committed to building a brand for certain franchises. So, while *Finding Dory* and *Cars* were dubbed into Hindi, *Zootopia, Inside Out* and *Big Hero 6* were not.

In the case of Universal, franchises such as *Kung Fu Panda* and *Despicable Me* have been dubbed into Hindi, while films such as *The Secret Life of Pets* and *Sing* have not. Komal Bhatia explained that Warner Bros. properties, such as *Happy Feet* and *The Lego Movie*, were not dubbed because 'Animated movies in this country are still looked upon as cartoon films for kids. They're not regarded as adult entertainment, so children really have to force their parents to take them out to watch this content.'[7] S. Kumar of Fox offered a different perspective about animation and spoke at great length about how he had worked to cultivate an audience for such films. He pinpointed the reasons for Fox's success with dubbing animated films:

> Animation like an *Ice Age* or a *Rio* which travels to the teens and young adults, they're working better; the minute it goes toward a younger audience like a *Turbo*, it's not working; so, animation that appeals to young adults, yes; not the ones for kids, not in India.[8]

A critical part of the decision to dub a film has to do with the cost–benefit calculations undertaken by the local managers. Many films are deemed too expensive to dub, not because of the costs of

Hindi poster of *Finding Dory*

The minute you get into Hindi and even Tamil, Telugu, your marketing cost goes up drastically. To reach an English audience is easy. More online, less TV and everything; the minute you get into Hindi, you get into Hindi satellite and you need to do the posters and this and all that. So, the marketing cost goes up drastically.[9]

Sarabjit Singh, Managing Director of Universal Pictures International's India Office, pointed out,

Although there would be films, which are sort of on the borderline of being classified as you would dub it, and even then, you wouldn't dub it, because it doesn't really generate that kind of revenue, so as to support all the costs associated with it.[10]

When I asked for some ballpark figures about marketing costs, Singh replied, 'It depends on how wide we go. If we went as wide as 2,000 screens in India, our advertising and publicity budget would be about ₹7 crore to 10 crore.'[11]

While Kumar acknowledged that releasing dubbed films increased costs, he pointed out, counterintuitively, that dubbed films have the potential to increase box office revenues from the original English version of a film. He narrated how he was able to convince Fox to take a chance and let him dub animated films into Tamil and Telugu.

I told them, 'I'm not going to get that extra money from Tamil, but I will get it from Tamil Nadu. I will get it from AP-Nizam put together, but not from Telugu. My Telugu may cover your dubbing costs, but it may not cover your marketing costs. But, overall, from that state you will get it.'...I showed them—for example, with *Ice Age*, the difference—the previous *Ice Age* in Tamil Nadu was 15 lakh share. The minute I dubbed it, it went to 75 lakh—90 per cent from English; only 7 per cent was [from] Tamil. The number of shows go up; the movie gets a scale. The minute you spend money, give it a scale, then a cinema that normally plays two shows of animation suddenly plays four shows. They feel the movie has something in it, which is why the distributor is behind it. That's why it's dubbed; that's why they're putting money behind it. It gives you a better reach—more showcasing, and that brings in the numbers. So, you have to do it smartly.[12]

dubbing, but rather because of the marketing and publicity costs associated with releasing a dubbed film. While the costs of dubbing and mixing a film in India can range from ₹7–10 lakh, marketing and publicity costs are exponentially higher because of a reliance on more traditional forms of print and television publicity, which are more expensive than digital forms. Kumar explained:

Kumar's statements reveal the critical marketing and promotional role played by dubbed content. Dubbing a Hollywood film into a local language, according to him, becomes an index of a film's overall desirability to both exhibitors and audiences alike.

Unlike dubbed foreign content from Hong Kong that circulated in southern India through more informal and provincial distribution circuits (Srinivas, 2003), the circulation of dubbed Hollywood films occurs formally through the Indian subsidiaries of Hollywood studios. What should be apparent from the discussion thus far is that the Indian branches of the Hollywood studios have a great deal of autonomy over their decision-making. This autonomy manifests itself through the dubbing process.

HOLLYWOOD'S RELIANCE ON BOLLYWOOD

Scholars of audiovisual translation have argued that dubbing films or television shows always involves more than an inter-lingual transfer (Ascheid, 1997; Bernabo, 2017; Ferrari, 2011), and that dubbing 'transforms the original into a blueprint…which is to be reinscribed into a new cultural context via the dubbing process' (Ascheid, 1997: 33). For Hollywood films dubbed into Hindi, that new cultural context is heavily shaped by Bollywood. When examining the actual practice of dubbing, the boundaries between Hollywood and Bollywood appear blurred and porous (Ganti, 2021a). All of the personnel doing the labour—from the scriptwriters to voice artistes, dubbing directors and recording engineers—are located in Mumbai and also frequently work in the mainstream Hindi film industry. Not only do the Hollywood majors rely on local companies in India to carry out the translation and dubbing of their films, but increasingly for their Hindi versions, are eager to utilise Bollywood stars for the dubbing, and employ established screenwriters from the Hindi film industry to write the dub scripts.

In fact, the main template for Hindi dubbing is to recast the Hollywood film into the mould of a Bollywood film. The Disney team in Mumbai, which decided to dub *The Jungle Book* in Hindi, spoke at length about their decisions and strategies for the film, as well as their general brief for films they choose to dub. They mentioned that when they brief a writer about adapting a Hollywood film, they tell him that it should 'be more like a Hindi film' with 'localised humour' as the 'local connect is very important'.

Hence, their choice of writer is crucial to the localisation process, which is why, for *The Jungle Book*, they chose to go with Mayur Puri, an established screenwriter from the Hindi film industry known for his flair for comedy, rather than a conventional dubbing scriptwriter. Referring to the scripting discussions, one of the managers stated, 'We treated it pretty much like a Hindi movie narration. How do we treat Baloo, how do we treat Bagheera, how do we treat Mowgli?'[13] Another elaborated on their efforts at local detailing, such as deciding to render Baloo the bear as a stereotypical Punjabi through his speech and vocal mannerisms. In response to my question about how a film like *Captain America,* which seemed such a quintessentially American story, could be localised, one of the Disney representatives described the film as having had a 'universal plot' of 'good vs. evil'. She continued:

> It was really taking that and seeing how we relate to it as Indians, which we do. I mean all of our stories right from *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat*, etc., are all about good vs. evil and that resonates well. So, it's finding that local connect in whichever story.[14]

One of the main strategies to make a dubbed film appear more familiar is to cite and make references to popular Hindi films. In my fieldwork at a dubbing studio, I noticed that dubbing professionals relied heavily on Hindi cinema and its vast repertoire of films, songs, stars, notable dialogues and iconic characters to localise Hollywood content. This was quite apparent during the Hindi dubbing of *Deadpool 2* (2018).

The dubbing director and the voice artist originally chosen to play the character of Deadpool[15] used Hindi cinema as their primary resource to adapt the irreverent and self-referential humour of the English original. Their choice of Hindi film references was not only based on their sense of what *Deadpool*'s viewing demographic would be most familiar with, but also on whether or not the references were generation-appropriate to the characters in the diegesis of the film itself. This point became very clear in a particular scene, where the X-man, Colossus, says, 'Come quietly or there will be trouble', which is a dialogue from the 1987 film *Robocop,* to which the 13-year-old boy, who is a crucial character in the film, responds, 'You stole that from *Robocop*!' When they came across this exchange in the film, the

Hindi poster of *Deadpool 2*

voice artist pointed out that it needed to be changed to a Hindi film reference. As they were brainstorming about which film and hero to reference, the dubbing director suggested the famous dialogue from the 1988 Amitabh Bachchan starrer *Shahenshah: 'Rishtey mein toh*

hum tumhare baap hote hain'. The voice artist responded that it was unlikely a 13-year-old kid would be familiar with *Shahenshah* and therefore would not recognise the reference, which would make the corresponding dialogue improbable. In this particular negotiation over localisation, the concern was more about verisimilitude within the diegesis, rather than about audience identification. After a little more discussion, they decided to go with the dialogue '*Aata maazhi satakli*' (My brain is just scrambled) from the 2011 film *Singham.*

Manoj Muntasir, a lyricist and scriptwriter for the Hindi film industry, who wrote the script for the Hindi dub of *Black Panther*, discussed the challenges and advantages of adapting the humour and pop culture references of a Hollywood film:

> *Hindi mein ek cheez hoti hai, jaiseke agar aap dekhe, toh* (When you think about the Hindi, you have to pay attention to), especially humour—you have to localise it. Because there they're talking about Justin Bieber; people in India, especially those going to watch a Hindi dubbed film, have absolutely no clue about Justin Bieber. They prefer Sonu Nigam and Arijit Singh. So, there is some challenge in adapting the humour and localising it; but if you get that right, it looks like a different film. You watch *Black Panther* Hindi, you watch *Black Panther* English, there are a couple of places where we have gone totally away from the actual script. We should not be deviating away from the basic story line, the characters, the gist of it, but we can certainly take liberties when it comes to localising it. So, we do that.[16]

One of the examples of localisation that Muntasir offered was to refer to the villain Shakaal—whose distinctive feature was his smooth bald head—from the 1980 Hindi film *Shaan,* to describe the women warriors of Wakanda whose heads were shaved.

> There's a dialogue in the English film where the cousin looks through the keyhole and sees the two bald ladies with spears standing there and the other guy asks, 'Who's out there?' I can't recall the English dialogue, but in Hindi we wrote, '*Shakaal ki betiyaan lag rahi hai.*' (They look like Shakaal's daughters.) There's the Shakaal character from *Shaan*? There's no Shakaal reference in the original film, but then there was humour—'*Pata nahi, do Shakaal*

ki betiyaan.' (Not sure, Shakaal's two daughters.) So that kind of stuff we kept doing, *jahaan jahaan* localise *kar paaye* (wherever we could localise).[17]

Such examples of mining older Hindi films for material point to the relative freedom that Indian dubbing professionals have in terms of creative decision-making.[18]

Another increasingly popular method of localisation undertaken by the Indian managers of Hollywood studios is to hire Bollywood stars as the lead voices for a dubbing project. Recent examples include superstar Amitabh Bachchan voicing for the titular character in Spielberg's *BFG*; Arjun Kapoor voicing for Buck, the weasel, in *Ice Age 5*; Varun Dhawan, as Captain America in *Captain America: Civil War*; Tiger Shroff, as Spiderman/Peter Parker, in *Spiderman: Homecoming;* Ranveer Singh, as the titular character in *Deadpool 2*; Shah Rukh Khan, as Mufasa in the live action version of Disney's *Lion King*; and Priyanka Chopra and Parineeti Chopra, as Elsa and Anna in *Frozen 2*. Rather than melding seamlessly into the film, a film star's voice, because of its familiarity, calls attention to the apparatus and artificiality of dubbing, even though dubbing professionals go to great lengths to efface the signs and traces of dubbing.

Ranveer Singh interacting with fans before a sneak preview screening of *Deadpool 2* at PVR Cinemas, Phoenix Mills, Lower Parel, Mumbai, May 2018

The main impetus to utilise Hindi film stars is a marketing and promotional strategy where the star's presence is foregrounded, rather than erased. This is in stark contrast to the prohibitions outlined in voice artists' contracts with Hollywood studios against publicising one's role in voicing for particular animated characters or Hollywood actors. Kumar stated that Hindi film stars were primarily hired for their P. R. value: 'We get a lot of mileage on the media so that helps a lot. It increases the reach.'[19] When I asked the team at Disney India about their reasons for choosing Varun Dhawan to provide the voice for Captain America in *Captain America: Civil War,* they listed his 'huge following with kids' and his 'incredible mass appeal'. There are numerous promotional videos airing on YouTube, where film stars discuss their experiences dubbing for a particular film, combined with footage of them in the dubbing studio. The Indian news media also reports heavily on film stars who have voiced for Hollywood films. Therefore, managers of the Indian affiliates of the Hollywood majors attempt to market Hollywood content through Bollywood's star-centric frameworks. For them, a Hindi film star adds value in terms of name recognition, publicity and fan mobilisation. Hollywood's desire to capitalise on Bollywood stars is because of the continuing importance of the theatrical box office in India. According to the 2019 Ernst & Young Report, prepared for FICCI, the domestic theatrical box office accounts for 69 per cent of revenue from filmmaking (2019: 76–77); whereas in Hollywood, that number is less than 15 per cent (Caldwell, 2008). When including the overseas markets, 78 per cent of revenue from the film sector in India is earned from theatrical exhibition.

Hindi-dubbed Hollywood films also rely on the same distributors and distribution networks as Bollywood films. In fact, since dubbed films are part of the same distribution and exhibition apparatus as mainstream Bollywood films, the release schedule of dubbed Hollywood films is now calibrated with the release schedule of Bollywood films, and vice versa. High-profile Bollywood producers avoid releasing their films on the same date as a heavily anticipated Hollywood film, which would be dubbed into Hindi, and Hollywood studios avoid releasing their high-profile projects opposite a heavily anticipated Bollywood film. An example of the former was when no major Hindi film released on the same date as *Avengers: Infinity War* in 2018, and an example of the latter was

in 2016, when *The Jungle Book* released a week earlier in India, in order to avoid a clash with Shah Rukh Khan's *Fan*. Kumar spoke of the fluidity of release dates and the ripple effects of changing release dates on both industries:

> If I announce a *Deadpool 2,* I know no big Hindi movie is going to come up against that. The minute we changed the date of *Deadpool 2*, immediately Zee too changed their date…. Thanks to *Padmaavat,* we actually got screwed with our movie, *The Maze Runner*—the date was changed at the last minute. Two weeks before we had to go [to the head office in the United States] and say, 'We have to change the date because *Padmaavat* is coming out on that date.' Hollywood also looks at the big Hindi movies and avoids clashes. It's vice versa.[20]

As dubbed Hollywood films are part of the same distribution network as Bollywood films, their commercial outcome is incorporated into the overall assessments of the health of the Hindi film industry. Since the mid-2000s, dubbed Hollywood films have had a steady presence in the Hindi film trade press' annual box office classificatory nomenclature as 'coverage, commission earner, or overflow', which refers to whether or not territorial distributors can recover or profit from their investment. From 2012 onward, dubbed Hollywood films have been steadily registering as 'hits' within the trade; in other words, distributors have been able to earn double or triple their investment.[21] Sarabjit Singh explained that from the point of view of the distributors, Hollywood films were less risky propositions.

> If you look at how the films are being negotiated as far as the terms are concerned, then I think Hollywood films are safer because studios like us don't charge a minimum guarantee, we do it on the basis of revenue sharing. There's no risk involved.[22]

While Singh pointed out that most Hollywood films do not earn nearly as much as Bollywood films, he acknowledged that for a distributor (or even an exhibitor), the distinction between a profitable Bollywood film or a dubbed Hollywood film is irrelevant. As Rajesh Thadani, Head of Distribution for Pen India Ltd., summed up, 'If it's a Hollywood film or a Bollywood film… it doesn't matter…ultimately the distributors are benefiting and the

exhibitors are benefiting.'[23] Singh concurred, 'Everyone benefits because money flows into the local system.'[24] Paying attention to the political economy of dubbing asks us to interrogate nation-bounded understandings of film industries.

DUBBING AND THE QUESTION OF 'INDIAN CINEMA'

Although he was referring to remakes rather than dubbing, S.V. Srinivas' assertion that 'the task at hand is to make the fact of celluloid films' susceptibility to mutation, as they travel down the distribution and exhibition ladders, a problem for film studies' (2008: 1) is relevant and important for the study of dubbed films as well. The production of dubbed films requires us to expand our conventional categorisation of cinema beyond plot, narrative, genre, and the faces onscreen, and to take into consideration such factors as translation, language, dialogue, voice, labour, distribution networks, exhibition infrastructure and marketing strategies. Rather than dismissing dubbed films as some sort of 'failure' (Gambier, 2012) or aberration, we should think of these Hindi-dubbed Hollywood films as being a part of the diverse agglomeration that comes under the category of 'Indian cinema' (Ganti, 2021a).

Although this article focuses on the dubbing of Hollywood films into Hindi for theatrical release, dubbing more generally comprises an industrial network that blurs and makes porous the boundaries between the Hong Kong industry and Telugu cinema (Srinivas, 2003, 2008), Bollywood and 'regional' cinema (Srinivas, et al., 2018), and Bollywood and Hollywood (Ganti, 2021a). While a focus on the political economy of the dubbing of Hollywood problematises the notion of nation-state-bound categories of industry and cinema, scholarship about the dubbing of Telugu and Tamil films into Hindi calls into question categories such as 'national' and 'regional' used to describe filmmaking traditions within India (Srinivas, et al., 2018). With the shutdown of cinemas during the COVID–19 pandemic, leading many Hindi filmmakers to release their films on such OTT platforms as Netflix and Amazon Prime, exhibitors in India are looking to dubbed south Indian films as a lifeline for the theatrical sector (Farooqui, 2020). When theorising about the future of cinema in India, dubbed films will need to be at the centre, rather than at the margins.

◆

NOTES

1. Author interview with Sarabjit Singh (Universal India) on 11 May 2018, Mumbai.

2. Author interview with Rajjat Barjatya on 29 April 1996, Mumbai.

3. Author interview with S. Kumar (Fox Star Studios, India) on 8 March 2018, Mumbai.

4. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

6. I discovered, however, that a much larger library of Hollywood films is dubbed for the DVD and what is referred to as the 'downstream market', including titles that all of the people I spoke to asserted would 'never be dubbed'. Hollywood studios frequently sell the licenses for non-theatrical distribution to companies such as Deluxe Media, which then make the decision to dub content. This is an issue that requires further research.

7. Author interview with Komal Bhatia (Warner Bros. Pictures, India) on 16 May 2018, Mumbai.

8. Author interview with S. Kumar (Fox Star Studios, India) on 8 March 2018, Mumbai.

9. *Ibid.*

10. Author interview with Sarabjit Singh (Universal India) on 11 May 2018, Mumbai.

11. *Ibid.*

12. *Ibid.*

13. Author interview with Vice President, Disney India, on 8 August 2016, Mumbai.

14. Author interview at Disney India on 8 August 2016, Mumbai.

15. He was later replaced by Bollywood star, Ranveer Singh.

16. Author interview with Manoj Muntasir on 9 May 2018, Mumbai. Muntasir's first foray into dubbing was writing the Hindi dialogues for the dubbed version of the Telugu blockbuster films *Baahubali 1* and *Baahubali 2*.

17. While the industrial contexts are very different, the discussion of and pride in 'localisation' is similar to the emphasis on and pride in adding 'nativity' in the dubbing of Hong Kong films into Telugu discussed by S. V. Srinivas (2003).

18. However, each film comes with a list of 'key notes and phrases', mandated by the Hollywood studio, that either have to be retained as is, in the case of proper names and brands, or translated literally or explained rather than localised in the case of certain historical events or concepts central to the narrative. For a more detailed description of the dubbing process, see Ganti (2021b).

19. Author interview with S. Kumar (Fox Star Studios, India) on 8 March 2018, Mumbai.

20. *Ibid.*

21. See Ganti (2012) for a more detailed discussion of how commercial outcome is classified within the Hindi film industry and the critical role played by territorial distributors in these classifications.

22. Author interview with Sarabjit Singh (Universal India) on 11 May 2018, Mumbai.

23. Author interview with Rajesh Thadani (Pen India, Ltd.) on 12 May 2018, Mumbai.

24. Author interview with Sarabjit Singh (Universal India) on 11 May 2018, Mumbai.

REFERENCES

Ascheid, Antje. 1997. 'Speaking Tongues: Cinema as Cultural Ventriloquism', *The Velvet Light Trap*, 40 (Fall): 32–41.

Bernabo, Laurena Elizabeth Nelson. 2017. 'Translating Identity: Norms and Industrial Constraints in Adapting *Glee* for Latin America.' Unpublished PhD Dissertation. University of Iowa.

Bhushan, Nyay. 2017. 'Hollywood Film Revenue in India Rises 10 per cent, Boosted by Dubbed Versions', *The Hollywood Reporter,* 21 March 2017. http://www. hollywoodreporter.com/news/hollywood-film-revenue-india-rises-10-percent-boosted-by-dubbed-versions-987585.

———. 2016. 'India Box Office: *Jungle Book* Becomes Top Hollywood Release Ever', *The Hollywood Reporter,* 20 April 2016. https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/india-box-office-jungle-book-885950.

Busch, Anita. 2016. '*The Jungle Book* Becomes Highest-Grossing Hollywood Release Ever in India', *Deadline Hollywood,* 21 April 2016. https://deadline.com/2016/04/the-jungle-book-highest-grossing-hollywood-release-ever-in-india-1201741499/.

Cain, Rob. 2016. '*The Jungle Book* Rocks India's Box Office with Second-Best Debut Ever for a Hollywood Film', *Forbes*, 9 April 2016. https://www.forbes.com/sites/robcain/2016/04/09/jungle-book-rocks-indias-box-office-with-2nd-best-debut-ever-for-a-hollywood-film/?sh=77c2b44122fe.

Caldwell, John T. 2008. *Production Culture: Industrial Reflexivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Chatterjee, Saibal. 1999. 'The Dubbing Rub', *Outlook,* 1 March 1999. https://magazine.outlookindia.com/story/the-dubbing-rub/207074.

Ernst & Young. 2019. *A Billion Screens of Opportunity: India's Media and Entertainment Sector.* New Delhi: Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

———. 2018. *Re-Imagining India's M&E Sector.* New Delhi: Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

Farooqui, Maryam. 2020. 'Why Vijay's Master or Vikram's Cobra are likely to have Hindi Versions', *Moneycontrol.com.* 30 July 2020. https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/entertainment/why-vijays-master-or-vikrams-cobra-are-likely-to-have-hindi-versions-5616721.html.

Ferrari, Chiara Francesca. 2011. *Since When is Fran Drescher Jewish? Dubbing Stereotypes in* The Nanny, The Simpsons, *and* The Sopranos. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.

Film Information. 2017. 'Classification: 2016', January, 7: 9.

Gambier, Yves. 2012. 'The Position of Audiovisual Translation Studies', in Carmen Millan and Francesca Batrina (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies*. London: Routledge: 45–59.

Ganti, Tejaswini. 2021a. 'Blurring the Boundaries Between Hollywood and Bollywood: The Production of Dubbed Films in Mumbai', in Monika Mehta and Madhuja Mukherjee (eds.), *Industrial Networks of Indian Cinema: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies and Multiplying Media*. London: Routledge: 208–21.

———. 2021b. '"English is so Precise and Hindi can be so Heavy!": Language Ideologies and Audience Imaginaries in a Dubbing Studio in Mumbai', in Steven C. Caton and Ramyar Rossoukh (eds.), *Anthropology, Film Industries, Modularity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press; 41–61.

———. 2012. *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Govil, Nitin. 2015. *Orienting Hollywood: A Century of Film Culture Between Los Angeles and Bombay*. New York: New York University Press.

———. 2008. 'India: Hollywood's Domination, Extinction, and Re-Animation (With Thanks to *Jurassic Park*)', in Paul McDonald and Janet Wasko (eds.), *The Contemporary Hollywood Film Industry*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing: 285–93.

Gupta, Priya. 2015. 'Hollywood is Turning out to be Bollywood's Biggest Competitor', *The Times of India*, 17 June. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/english/hollywood/news/hollywood-is-turning-out-to-be-bollywoods-biggest-competitor/articleshow/47691269.cms.

Jha, Lata. 2016. '*The Jungle Book* Crosses ₹140 crore Mark in India', *Livemint*, 27 April. https://www.livemint.com/Consumer/tdVkXkVZniYuaabuRQsHLP/The-Jungle-Books-success-heartens-Disney-to-boost-2016-rel.html.

KPMG. 2017. *Media & Entertainment Industry Report: Media for the Masses: The Promise Unfolds.* New Delhi: Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).

PTI (Press Trust of India). 2016. 'Shah Rukh's *Fan* Forces *The Jungle Book* to Change its India Release Date,' *Hindustan Times*, 17 February. https://www.hindustantimes.com/hollywood/shah-rukh-s-fan-forces-jungle-book-to-change-its-india-release-date/story-QS0fRAQc7wWtM7H47QLMWI.html.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish and Paul Willemen. 1999. *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema.* New rev. ed. London: British Film Institute.

Ramachandran, Naman. 2016. 'Localisation Makes *The Jungle Book* a Hit in India', *Variety*, 21 April. https://variety.com/2016/film/news/localization-makes-jungle-book-a-hit-in-india-1201758157/?jwsource=cl.

Rapoza, Kenneth. 2016. 'What Indians are Really Saying about Disney's *The Jungle Book*', *Forbes*, 10 April. https://www.forbes.com/sites/kenrapoza/2016/04/10/what-indians-are-really-saying-about-disneys-the-jungle-book/?sh=26b82eb7480b.

Sehgal, Nutan. 2010. 'Hollywood Reaches out to India', *The Tribune*, 25 April. https://www.tribuneindia.com/2010/20100425/spectrum/main9.htm.

Srinivas, S. V. 2008. 'Missing in the Original: Twin Dragons Remade in India', *Journal of Moving Image,* Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University.

———. 2003. 'Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B Circuit', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4 (2): 40–62.

Srinivas, S. V., V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam, Raghav Nanduri, Vasundhara Singhal and Vishnu Dath Raveendran. 2018. 'From Single Screen to YouTube: Tracking the Regional Blockbuster', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 9 (2): 233–50. DOI:10.1177/0974927619841205.

❦❦

DIGITAL HORROR IN HINDI CINEMA

IPSITA BARAT

Ever since the turn of the millennium, films produced by the Bombay film industry have undergone transformations in terms of how image and sound are recorded, how the two are edited (and manipulated), and how the final piece is delivered to the audience and experienced by it.[1] From approximately 2010 onwards, Hindi films are predominantly recorded, edited and distributed in the digital format. In this paper, I explore the implications of digital mediation on the apparatus of filmmaking in Bombay cinema. I also identify and comment on the distinctive narrative and styles that are emerging in Bombay cinema as a result of the prevalent digital culture in the new millennium.

The presence of visual effects (VFX) in Hindi cinema in the new millennium is overpowering. The digitised hyper-real image in cinema experienced a resurgence with the Hollywood production, *Avatar* (dir: James Cameron; 2009), with digitally rendered images having photo-realistic qualities. With the standardisation of such digital manipulability options in blockbuster Hindi cinema, the images incorporated in these films are moving away from the idea of 'indexicality' of the photographic image. I believe this has brought to the mainstream imagination genres such as horror, science fiction and fantasy in which the 'visual appeal' of the film is dependent on showcasing the 'fantastic', which relies heavily on VFX. Before the new millennium, especially in the 1960s and 1970s, these genres were marginal and were often relegated to the B and C categories of cinema.[2] In the new millennium, invoking some of the similar tropes of these B- and C-grade films, these genres have reinvented a VFX-driven spectacular version of themselves, now having a distinctive

big-screen appeal. Here, I have focused particularly on the genre of the horror film. Interestingly, the Hindi horror film progressed from its B-grade status in the 1980s, to the television format in the 1990s, with serials such as *Zee Horror Show* (ZHS) and *Aahat*—big-screen, VFX-driven spectacle in the new millennium—followed by its current presence in several Over the Top (OTT) platforms. This article outlines the manner in which the horror genre in Hindi cinema has mutated as a result of accommodating various delivery platforms, such as television and the Web, technological mediation concerning the use of lightweight cameras and enhanced sound technology, and the incorporation of VFX.

Digital intervention in cinema first began with digital intermediate (DI) technology, where films shot on 35 mm celluloid went through digitisation through telecine to create a digital intermediary. This footage was then edited and manipulated, using nonlinear editing software (such as Avid products) before the output was converted to film.[3] By the early 2000s, Hindi films such as *Saathiya* (dir: Shaad Ali; 2002), *Kaante* (dir: Sanjay Gupta; 2002), *Khakee* (dir: Rajkumar Santoshi; 2004) and *Lakshaya* (dir: Farhan Akhtar; 2004) were using DI technology, digitising the shot material for post-production. The DI technology helped incorporate visual effects as well as aided digital colour correction of film. However, by 2005, Hindi films were also shot, distributed and exhibited digitally, thereby becoming truly digital films.[4] Before the new millennium, the use of VFX in Hindi cinema remained limited to the 'blue/green screen' technique, also referred to as keying.[5] The film *Ghulam* (dir: Vikram Bhatt; 1998) had a train stunt sequence, where the lead character played by Amir Khan takes up a challenge. Khan runs towards an approaching train, jumping off the track at the very last moment. This action sequence was made possible with the aid of the green/blue screen technique. Khan was made to run in front of a blue screen and, later, the image was digitally composited against an image of a fast-approaching train.[6] However, it is only in the new millennium that Hindi cinema adopted a host of new VFX techniques such as 3D Tracking,[7] Matte Painting,[8] Rotoscoping,[9] Simulation VFX,[10] 3D Modelling,[11] 3D Compositing (collectively called visual effects),[12] which reinforces the manipulability of the image, giving rise to new cinematic possibilities. The hyper-realistic images of contemporary VFX-driven Hindi cinema are derivatives

of these new VFX techniques. Here, live-action footage is integrated with computer-generated imagery to create visuals, which simulate real-world imagery, giving rise to an excessive presence of photo-realistic VFX.

To quote production designer Sumit Bose:

The challenge is to make everything real and realistic even when I am showing the most unrealistic thing (….). To create a location [set] that is nowhere to be found [without a real-life reference], I use visual effects. For example, if I want to show night and yet do not want to let go of the beauty of the landscape, I shoot the landscape in daylight and convert it to a night sequence. During the outdoor sequence, the sky is often flat; during post-production, we often change the sky completely. For example, I am working on a film *Mirzya* by Rakesh Omprakash Mehra and many locations will be created entirely in post-production with no original reference.[13]

Photo-realistic VFX became an important tool to enhance the visual appeal of Hindi cinema in the new millennium. Therefore, VFX no longer remains in the periphery and instead becomes central in the discourse on the aesthetic understanding of contemporary Hindi cinema. This is primarily on account of the scale at which it is incorporated in the new millennium, along with the finesse brought to enhance the visual appeal of the film. In the 1990s, VFX was used primarily as a correction tool to remove unwanted objects from the frame. Presently, VFX often overrules live-action elements. First, VFX techniques are used to create scenery/sequences, which, if shot in live-action, would not have achieved the grandeur (finesse) sought; and, second, to recreate on screen the 'fantastic', which, too, cannot be shot in live-action.[14]

The key theoretical debates on VFX in cinema centre on the question of lost indexical quality of the image (Belton, 2012; Manovich, 1999; Prince, 2012). Stephen Prince (1996) states that VFX brings forth 'perceptual realism', a realism of the sort based on the human perception of realistic-looking images. Scholars such as Aylish Wood (2002) have instead emphasised the divide between spectacle and narrative with the incorporation of VFX. However, I would like to focus on the 'designed' nature of the image in VFX-driven cinema. The 'making of' videos of films, which regularly

feature post-processing VFX incorporation, further emphasises this 'designed' aspect. These videos demonstrate the manner in which the image we see on screen is premeditated, simulated and fabricated in much the same way as any other pre-designed object. This 'designed' aspect can also be addressed with the use of computer-automated design (CAD) in the pre-visualisation of a film. Pre-visualisation brings VFX into the domain of pre-production, enabling the visualisation of complex scenes in the film even before the film is shot (in live-action and/or created with the aid of VFX). Therefore, VFX, in all stages of production, extends a degree of control over the image, thereby broadening the degree of manipulability offered by the digital format. As a result, multiple desired looks can be achieved within the limits of image data collected. Although John Belton has negated any fit between the aesthetic and technology by identifying the digital revolution as a 'false revolution' (2002), here I will differ from him as I argue that the adoption of the digital format has steered filmmakers towards a distinctive aesthetic, particularly in the genres of horror, science fiction and fantasy. In the new millennium, with the prominence of the 'image' and 'spectacle', these genres have entered the blockbuster mainstream imagination. However, this centrality of 'image' is primarily driven by VFX. Here, VFX sequences become components 'to be looked at'. Although such

Screen capture of the making of the film *Dhoom 3*. VCL Tata Elxsi, 2018.
Image courtesy of author

sequences (slow motion, fight sequences, among others) were a conventional source of 'spectacle' in the 1970s and 1980s or even earlier, VFX-driven sequences of Hindi blockbuster cinema in the new millennium draw attention to themselves, becoming discrete attractions in their own right. With VFX being prominently used to showcase the 'fantastic' and the 'spectacular', these genres have refashioned themselves with the use of 'spectacle' in the form of VFX, thereby responsible for their distinctive appeal as big-screen events for theatrical audiences.

REVISITING HORROR IN HINDI CINEMA

Ashim Ahluwalia's celebrated feature film *Miss Lovely* (2012), set in the 1980s, delves into the functioning of Bombay's C-grade sex–horror film. According to Ahluwalia, the C-grade horror film of the 1980s had no effective storyline and often relied heavily on pornographic material (*Creative Mornings HQ*, 2014). Ahluwalia states that these films, shot on celluloid, consisted of horror and bandit (*daku*) elements, with erotic excerpts typically containing approximately 11 minutes of pornographic material called 'bits reel'. Lotte Hoek (2013) also refers to this spliced pornographic content as 'cut-pieces'. Her research consists of an ethnographic and archival study of the screening of such illegal, sexually explicit, celluloid 'cut-pieces' in Bangladeshi popular cinema. Hoek suggests that the bits/cut-pieces were made in a cottage porn production system and then traded with exhibitors. These pornographic images appeared suddenly while screening, as the projectionist spliced in strips of celluloid.

The relatively mainstream genre of Hindi horror of the 1980s is primarily associated with the Ramsay Brothers brand, a family-owned film production house that specialised in making low-budget, B-grade, Hindi horror films.[15] The family comprised seven brothers—Shyam, Tulsi, Kiran, Gangu, Keshu, Arjun and Kumar—who made small-budget horror films such as *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche* (1972), *Darwaza* (1978), *Guest House* (1980), *Ghungroo Ki Awaaz* (1981), *Purani Haveli* (1989), among others.[16] Most of these films had Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay labelled as directors, with all other aspects of filmmaking handled by family members. Kartik Nair refers to such productions as 'tiffin-box production' (2012), featuring non-mainstream stars Shobhana, Imtiaz Khan, Puneet Issar and Aarti Gupta. Nair also states that these films had poor production budgets

and were often shot in a single location, such as an old bungalow/mansion.[17] Unlike mainstream Hindi cinema, Ramsay Brothers films targeted 'rural territories'. In this, they broke away from mainstream Hindi cinema that monopolised the more esteemed urban centres of exhibition (Nair, 2012: 127). This was also because mainstream elite audiences failed to align with the overarching themes of Ramsay Brothers films—superstition, reincarnation, the existence of *chudails* (witches), among others.

Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche was made on a budget of ₹3.5 lakh. The film was shot entirely on location in a government guesthouse in Mahabaleshwar. Furthermore, the film's key crew comprised members of the Ramsay family. The film begins with widower and young scientist Rajvansh (Surendra Kumar) rescuing spinster Anjali (Shobhana) from evil men, and eventually marrying her. However, we learn that this was a ploy by Anjali and her uncle (Satyendra Kapoor), motivated by ulterior motives of extorting money from Rajvansh. Rajvansh later rescues Meera (Pooja), who nurses him when he meets with an accident in his laboratory. Later, Anjali has an affair with her ex-lover Anand (Imtiaz Khan), who, posing as Rajvansh's doctor, murders and buries him in a graveyard. Thereafter, Rajvansh returns as a zombie to avenge his death. However, it turns out that Rajvansh, who was in fact alive all this while, had disguised himself as a zombie to punish his wrongdoers. The film also includes an item number by Helen—by now regarded as an A-list star—in a guest appearance. Besides several ghost sequences, especially towards the climax, the film also includes elaborate erotic sequences—Anjali seducing Rajvansh, or her lovemaking scenes with Anand.

The overarching form of the Ramsay Brothers film corresponds to the masala format of Hindi cinema, which also dominated mainstream Hindi cinema in the 1980s.[18] However, in all Ramsay Brothers films, these individual ingredients remain fragmented and disruptive. For example, the typical masala ingredients in *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche* are action sequences, song and dance sequences, sensual elements, the love story, zombie sequences, comedy subplots, and so on, but the song and dance sequences do not serve a diegetic purpose.[19] Similarly, the erotic sequences and comic routines are elaborate and appear purely for scopophilic pleasure and comic relief.[20]

Another distinctive characteristic of the Ramsay Brothers film is the autonomous value of the horror sequence.[21] Followed by *Do Gaz Zameen Ke Neeche,* Ramsay Brothers produced a series of horror films, using tropes such as '*purani havelis*' (old, haunted mansions) in *Darwaza*; '*bhatakti aatma*' (wandering evil spirits) in *Aur Kaun* (1979); witchcraft in *Veerana* (1998); quasi-wolfmen in *Andhera* (1980), among others. The parlance of the purani haveli continued in many more films: e.g., *Purana Mandir* (1984), *Haveli* (1985), *Tehkhana* (1986) and *Purani Haveli* (1989). However, the 'tiffin box' nature of the production remains a common factor. Furthermore, the unrelenting reliance on the erotogenic sequence demonstrates that the key audiences for these films were men, particularly those belonging to the lower socio-economic stratum.[22] The ubiquitous presence of erotogenic sequences in almost all Ramsay Brothers films was also a reason why these films were never considered fit for a family audience. Furthermore, these films, which were distributed by small-scale distributors, ran on slim margins, and were exhibited in insignificant cinema theatres (Sen, 2017). In so doing, Ramsay Brothers films 'flourished within a political economy that was adjacent to, but not co-extensive with, the Hindi film industry at the time' (ibid.: 53).

Purana Mandir (1984), directed by Shyam and Tulsi Ramsay, featured Anirudh 'Ajay' Agarwal as a demonic creature called Saamri. The film begins with a flashback in which the demon Saamri kills a princess. This demon, which sucks blood from young women and eats corpses, is then captured by the king of Bijapur and decapitated. The king decides to bury the demon's body elsewhere, while storing its head in a *mandir* (temple) for safety. However, before dying, Saamri curses the king's female descendants with death on the birth of their first child. Returning to the present, the film then narrates the story of Thakur Ranvir Singh (Pradeep Kumar), the great-great-grandson of the king of Bijapur. Ranvir Singh forbids his daughter Suman (Aarti Gupta) to unite with her lover Sanjay on account of the curse. Thereafter, Suman and Sanjay, along with a friend, Anand (Puneet Issar), travel to Bijapur to put an end to the curse. However, in the process, Saamri rises from the dead, kills Anand, and once again brings about mayhem and death in Bijapur. The demon is finally captured and killed by Sanjay and Suman with a *trishul* (holy trident). The curse is lifted and, thereafter, the couple is united.

In *Purana Mandir*, horror is created with the aid of superimpositions, smoke, fog, the use of unsophisticated prosthetic makeup, in-camera effects, thrilling background scores and much fake blood. Besides horror, raunchy erotic sequences are also randomly used in the film, featuring close-up shots of female body parts, dream sex sequences, and so on. The amplification of sex and violence in films like *Purana Mandir* resulted in an adult certification by the Censor Board (Nair, 2012: 132). By the early 1990s, the Ramsay Brothers banner had disintegrated, and the brand was dismantled. However, at this point horror took its newfound place on Indian television.

In the 1990s, Shyam Ramsay and Tulsi Ramsay, continuing family tradition, started producing *Zee Horror Show* (ZHS). The show was telecast on ZEE TV network from 1993 to 1997, with a format of short horror stories, each comprising four to five episodes. The show was allotted the prime-time slot of Friday/9.30 pm. Many actors such as Surendra Pal, Anirudh Agarwal and Javed Khan, who had previously featured prominently in Ramsay Brothers films, continued to perform in ZHS. Thereafter, ZEE network launched another horror serial, *X-Zone* (1998–2002). The show featured stars such as Irrfan Khan, Kay Kay Menon and Ashutosh Rana. Sony Entertainment Television also launched horror-based programmes such as *Aahat* in 1995, which completed its sixth season in 2015. In the early years of the millennium, STAR TV too launched a horror show, *Ssshhhh…Koi Hai,* which completed its third season in 2010.

However, even the salvaged version of horror on Indian television remained mostly low-budget productions.[23] Moreover, adhering to the tradition of the Ramsay Brothers brand, horror elements typically included deserted mansions, wandering souls, frenzied camera movements, witches, and such like. The special effects were minimal, and the makers relied heavily on the use of crude prosthetic makeup to create ghostly characters. In some instances, horror was interspersed with the elements of a thriller, such as stories about crimes being solved with the intervention of ghostly spiritual forces.[24] However, with the change in audience configuration from films to national television, the erotic scenes, which received considerable screen time in Ramsay Brothers horror films, now became significantly less explicit. This was primarily because shows like ZHS were now in the process of nurturing 'middle-class drawing room sensitivities' (Mubarki, 2016: 146).

In the 1990s and the early years of the 21st century, director Ram Gopal Verma (henceforth, RGV) became a brand name associated with the genre of horror in Hindi cinema. The 1990s saw the horror genre entering the mainstream imagination of Hindi cinema with RGV films such as *Raat* (dir: RGV; 1992), *Junoon* (dir: Mahesh Bhatt; 1992), and a few others in the early 2000s such as *Bhoot* (dir: RGV; 2003), *Darna Mana Hai* (dir: RGV; 2003), among others. Unlike the masala horror films of the Ramsay Brothers brand, RGV films were unadulterated, niche horror films. *Raat* is about a female college student Mini (Revathi) and her family relocating to a haunted house situated in an upmarket locality. Shortly thereafter, a series of eerie events occur, involving several members of the family, culminating in Mini being possessed. Mini's mother Shalini Sharma (Rohini Hattangadi) seeks the help of a guru, Sharji (Om Puri), who, using his powers, locates the ghost in the house and exorcises it from Mini's body. RGV's second horror film *Bhoot* (2003) also uses the trope of possession. Swati (Urmila Matondkar) and Vishal (Ajay Devgan) relocate to a new house. The previous resident of the house, Manjeet, a widow, had committed suicide by jumping off the balcony along with her son. Swati soon starts displaying strange behaviour, which is interpreted by her husband as psychological illness. However, the plot reveals that Manjeet has possessed Swati's body to avenge her own death. Both *Raat* and *Bhoot* have no songs, comedy or action subplots. The erotic sequences, featured prominently in Ramsay Brothers films, are also absent in RGV horror films. Instead, these films rely heavily on sound effects, long takes, unconventional camera angles and movements to evoke the eeriness of horror. The genre-specific camera and sound techniques used in RGV horror rely heavily on camerawork as well as sound design.[25] Unlike Ramsay Brothers films, the ghostly elements in RGV films are imperceptible. Instead, the ghostly presence is grasped through the eye of the camera. The horror spaces move considerably away from such exteriors as purani havelis or mandirs, and instead invade the familiarity of urban domestic space. In both *Raat* and *Bhoot,* paranormal forces invade the lives of a family based in an urban locality. Furthermore, the narratives of these films situate the horror in a psychological space, which Sangita Gopal (2011) labels as the 'new horror' that dwells in city spaces, features cosmopolitan characters, and showcases a consumerist lifestyle.

In the 1990s, the imagination of the Hindi cinema audiences changed considerably. With the opening up of the economy, Hindi cinema was now targeting US and UK markets.[26] At this point, 'NRI romances' featured significantly in the narratives of Hindi cinema.[27] These films focused particularly on the affluent urban (global) family and validated the newfound consumerist culture that came to India with the liberalisation of the economy.[28] The 1990s also saw the rise of 'family films', in response to Hindu nationalism and 'Hindutva politics' associated with the ruling Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP). The state equated 'family films' with 'good cinema', as they reaffirmed Indian 'tradition' and value systems. It is in this milieu that horror failed to consolidate itself as a mainstream genre. Instead, the focus remained on 'consumer-oriented joint families' (Mazumdar, 2008), with urban (global) families as a repetitive trope. The sole attempt made to accommodate horror was with RGV films such as *Raat, Junoon*, *Bhoot, Darna Mana Hai*, among others.[29] RGV horror dissociated itself from the Ramsay cottage industry of terror, adhering instead to genre conventions, and focusing on the immersive experience of horror. However, this horror imagination was aligned with the experience of cinema which multiplexes offered, its aesthetics uniquely addressing the niche multiplex audience.[30] In the case of the mainstream, the genre of horror became a misfit in the Bollywoodised imagination of Hindi cinema, which aligned itself to Hindu family values. Horror, with its history of association with the Ramsay Brothers brand, was held in contempt (also because of its sexually explicit content), and failed to appeal to the upper-class Hindu sensibilities of Bollywood cinema.

HORROR IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

Distinct from that which Gopal describes as 'new horror', films such as *Haunted 3D* (dir: Vikram Bhatt; 2011), *1920: Evil Returns* (dir: Bhushan Patel; 2012), *Ek Thi Daayan* (dir: Kannan Iyer; 2013)*, Aatma—Feel It Around You* (dir: Suparn Verma; 2013)*, Horror Story* (dir: Ayush Raina; 2013)*, Trip to Bhangarh* (dir: Jitendra Pawar; 2014)*,* among others, locate horror within the strictures of technology. 'Horror', being one amongst other film genres—science fiction, adventure films, VFX-driven action narratives—resurfaced within the blockbuster mould in the middle of the first decade of the 21st century. The arrival of the corporate studio led to the rise

in production budgets of Hindi films in the new millennium, with horror films becoming a constituent of the product diversification strategy of corporate studios. The increased production budget facilitated the incorporation of VFX to create the illusion of the supernatural in the narratives of these films. Consequently, one distinctive characteristic of the post-millennial Hindi horror film is the 'excess' in the form of VFX. In the case of the horror film, techno-spectacle renders a unique theatrical experience. The spectacle in horror works primarily at the level of visual effects. These visual effects in themselves become prominent, spectacular attractions, often disregarding the narrative coherence of the film. Thus, the 'spectacle' draws cinema away from the realm of the narrative, towards the realm of exhibitionism—in this case, serving as a stimulator, creating dazzle and awe in terms of sheer experience.

Ek Thi Daayan (2013) revolves around a family being haunted by a *daayan* (witch). The film begins with Bobo's (Emraan Hashmi) performance as a magician in a stage show. During his performance, Bobo has several hallucinations, which receive considerable screen time, revolving around his younger sister Misha's untimely death. When a psychiatrist hypnotises Bobo, it is revealed that in their childhood a daayan (Konkona Sen Sharma) had entered their lives, disguised as their stepmother, Diana. Eventually, she had killed Misha, and Bobo could only escape by cutting off her braid, as all the powers of a witch are said to lie in her braid. Coming out of hypnosis, Bobo realises the root cause of all his trouble and discusses the matter with his fiancée, Tamara (Huma Qureshi). Bobo mistakes another girl Lisa (Kalki Koechlin) for the re-emerged daayan, but later realises that the witch is in fact Tamara, disguised all this while. Finally, Bobo destroys (kills) the witch, restores peace in his life, and clears the misunderstanding with Lisa. *Ek Thi Daayan* was shot on Arri Alexa, a digital motion picture camera. Mumbai-based Prana Studio and Reliance Media Works handled VFX for the film. The film has VFX shots in every second scene, and is said to have a total of 350 such shots. The VFX in this film plays a major role in startling the audience, especially during horror sequences. For example, once Bobo cuts off Diana's braid, she begins to turn into ash. The imagery of this transition, which is a rather extensive shot, is implemented with the aid of VFX. A digitally created lizard is also used in several sequences of the film to create horror. Several magic enactments

that Bobo performs on stage (which create an ambience of fear) also achieve their desired impact because of the deployment of VFX. Visual effects are used throughout the film to create spectacles of horror—eyes popping out, gravity-defying stunts, terrifying creatures, ghostly enactments such as walking with reversed legs, among others. In these films, technology plays an important part in the formations and modalities of sites of horror.

The use of technology in the form of high-end VFX elevated the genre of the horror film from B-grade to A-grade in the new millennium. This was further aided by increased production budgets, the presence of stars and a Bollywoodised mise en scène. The hyper-digitised, technology-laden, spectacular imagery in these films, in the form of VFX-driven isolated attraction, attributes these films with novelty.

Presently, technological convergence has also led to the proliferation of new distribution channels such as video streaming websites Netflix, Amazon Prime, Hotstar, among others. This is indicative of a new cinephilic audience for whom watching films is not limited to the purview of the theatrical domain. Despite the access to film theatres, the new cinephile watches a multitude of films on television or on other home video options, including the Internet. Belén Vidal states that this new cinephilia gives rise to a culture of 'recycling', 'remaking', and 'remixing', thriving on the 'consumption of past cinema histories' on new media platforms (2017). Madhuja Mukherjee too states that new cinephilia, because of the culture of download, has easy access to an active repository of cinema (via legal streaming websites as well as illegal downloads from peer-to-peer video sharing websites) (2015). As a result, the narratives, which become effective for contemporary cinephiles, are also 'inter-textual', often thriving on 'retelling' existing tropes (ibid.). One may read the Hindi films which surfaced in the new millennium—with their emphasis on inter-textuality and self-reflectivity; for instance, the genre of horror—in light of such cinephilia. The VFX in these films is being put to a specific use that rekindles a certain kind of cinematic past for a contemporary audience. The tropes of witches and haunted mansions, which are relatively absent in the films bracketed as 'new horror', resurface once more in Hindi horror films of the new millennium. Here, modern invocations of pre-modern tropes find prominence, with VFX-driven sites of horror attributing

novelty to the genre. Furthermore, the new cinephile, not restricted by geographical boundaries, encompasses a multicultural audience. The contemporary Hindi horror film aligns itself to this audience imagination with narratives of regional nuances (often rooted in national culture and beliefs), and yet appeals to the worldwide (new) cinephile on account of being 'spectacular'. Films made for technology-mediated cinephiles do not need to limit themselves in terms of specificity—generic, cultural, setting, milieu, among others. Engaged as they are with transnational cinema across the globe through new media devices, heterogeneous audiences of the streaming platform, which now coequal the theatrical audience, are much better equipped to understand tropes often belonging to alternative cults.[31]

◆

NOTES

1. In the 1990s, Hindi films went through a process of digital intermediate (DI), in which film was converted to the digital format for the purpose of editing (using a non-linear editing set-up), before being converted back to film. In the decade of 2000, Hindi films also started being recorded in the digital format with the aid of high-end digital cameras such as Red One and Arriflex. This eventually led to the proliferation of digital projection by early 2005, with single-screen theatres and multiplexes in India becoming equipped with digital projectors.

2. B- and C-grade categories of films refer to those films that were/are made on a modest budget and remain/ed on the margins of mainstream Bombay cinema. Furthermore, these films were/are often made for the 'masses', 'working class' and 'non-metropolitan' audiences (Sen, 2017: 2). Valentina Vitali states that the industry structure of the Hindi film industry in the 1960s resulted in the proliferation of low-budget Hindi action films (2008). The industry at this point was increasingly fragmented, composed of small-scale producers who made films on an ad hoc basis, with film production being 'incubators for undeclared cash'. The productions were usually small scale, and distribution and exhibition circuits often remain outside the mainstream (ibid.). The same industrial configuration, as stated by Vitali (2008) in the context of the rise of small-budget action films in the 1960s, also remains broadly the economy of B-grade horror films in the 1960s (Sawhney, 2014: 126).

3. The process involves creating a digital positive image from the original film negative and using the same for video tapes as well as digital versatile disc (DVD) recordings. It is a type of post-production process in which footage originating on film is converted to the digital realm for editing, and the addition of visual effects and colour grading before being recorded back to film for distribution purposes.

4. Post-2010, digital cameras such as Red One, Red Epic and Arri Alexa became available in the Indian market. Soon, big-budget films (films with a bigger star cast) too began to adapt to digital filmmaking with *Student of the Year* (dir: Karan Johar; 2012), *Bhaag Milkha Bhaag* (dir: Rakeysh Omprakash Mehra; 2013), *Kai Po Che* (dir: Abhishek Kapoor; 2013), *Highway* (dir: Imtiaz Ali; 2014) and *Bajirao Mastani* (dir: Sanjay Leela Bhansali; 2015) being shot in the digital format. However, the exhibition sector went digital post-2005 with companies like UFO Moviez installing the 'E-cinema' digital cinema system, in which the film is exhibited using a digital projector.

5. Keying is a process in which two separate images are combined to create the illusion of a single image. In this process, actors perform against the backdrop of a blue screen or green screen and these backdrops are later replaced digitally.

6. Later films—*Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam* (dir: Sanjay Leela Bhansali; 1999), *Asoka* (dir: Santosh Sivan; 2001), *Chalte Chalte* (dir: Aziz Mirza; 2003), *Honeymoon Travels Pvt. Ltd.* (dir: Reema Kagti; 2007), *Dostana* (dir: Tarun Mansukhani; 2008), *Once Upon a Time in Mumbai* (dir: Milan Luthria; 2010), *Chennai Express* (dir: Rohit Shetty; 2013)—used this technology extensively.

7. 3D motion tracking is the process by which a software such as After Effects analyses the motion of several points of live-action footage (objects and people), and thereafter ensures that the movement is matched with any computer graphics added to the scene.

8. Matte painting is a VFX technique that employs traditional or 'digital' painting/photography to expand the scope or the environment in a shot. Previously, the paintings were created by hand on glass, or else were photographs, and thereafter the painted image and live-action footage were simply superimposed. In contrast, painting is now done with image editing software and digitally composited with a live-action image. Most contemporary matte painting is not painting at all, but is instead a combination of photographic images blended by an image editing software such as Photoshop. Additionally, 2D matte painting has given way to 3D matte painting in which the painting can now be viewed as a 3D object, resulting in 'depth', which traditional 2D paintings could never achieve.

9. Rotoscopy is a VFX technique used to trace every frame of motion picture footage, and thereafter make changes to each frame such as changing colours, extracting/masking a particular object in the scene, etc. Originally, tracing was done manually with the aid of a glass panel. Presently, tracing is computer-aided, and the traced image is thereafter integrated with other computer graphics. This technique is very relevant in live-action films where individual objects are extracted from a scene and thereafter composited with different objects. Aided by matte painting and motion tracking rotoscopy, it recreates unrealistic scenery in a live-action film.

10. Simulation FX is the simulation of real-life objects entirely on the computer using software such as After Effects, Maya, 3D Max, Real Flo and Adobe Premiere. While Real Flo recreates any kind of fluid on screen, Maya and 3D Max are used to simulate fire on screen, in particular.

11. 3D modelling recreates 3D digital objects on screen by using software such as Maya, 3D Max, among others. The process can be seen as digital sculpting, where the artist sculpts by manipulating individual points in the model. The process begins with the manipulation of a simple form (circle or square) divided

into small polygons (also referred to as mesh), followed by the manipulation of individual polygons. Once the model is created in the software, it is then accentuated digitally with colour, texture, shading and lighting.

12. 3D compositing refers to the assembling of multiple 3D images and/or objects to create one single 3-dimensional environment.

13. Author's interview with Sumit Bose, 31 October 2014.

14. VFX is often used to shoot crowd scenes, war sequences, and so on. While I do not claim that it reduces the production cost of the film, as visual effects are very expensive, nonetheless the scenes become grand with greater visual appeal. Furthermore, VFX also aids the creation of 'fantastic', non-real images on screen which cannot be shot in live action. For example, the song *dhoom tanna* from the film *Om Shanti Om* (dir: Farah Khan; 2007) showcases contemporary actor Deepika Padukone romancing yesteryear heroes Sunil Dutt, Rajesh Khanna and Jeetendra. The VFX for the film was handled by Red Chillies VFX, which used old film footage from *Amrapali* (dir: Lekh Tandon; 1966)*, Saccha Jhutha* (dir: Manmohan Desai; 1970), *Hamjoli* (dir: T. R. Ramanna; 1970) and *Jay-Vijay* (dir: L. V. Prasad; 1977). Thereafter, matt painting and chroma techniques were used to create the hyper-real imagery (Red Chillies Entertainment, 2018).

15. The genre of horror films remained relatively absent in Hindi mainstream cinema in the 1970s, and only reappeared as B-grade films produced by the Ramsay Brothers. This excludes the rare instance of films such as *Jadu Tona* (dir: Ravikant Nagaich; 1977), *Geherayee* (dir: Aruna Raje, Vikas Desai; 1980), *Red Rose* (dir: Bharathi Rajaa; 1980) and *Wo Phir Ayegi* (dir: B. R. Ishara; 1988). Nevertheless, these films were not able to consolidate the horror category as a full-fledged genre of Hindi cinema.

16. The other brothers handled aspects of filmmaking such as scriptwriting, cinematography, camerawork, editing, etc. (Nair, 2012).

17. To quote Nair: 'The Brothers never worked with bona fide stars (perhaps because they could not afford them), often drawing their talent from an alternative circuit of television and beauty pageants. They relied on fresh young blood to lubricate their production: the appeal of quick money without the hassles of high-maintenance stars' (2012: 130).

18. Sangita Gopal defines masala films as a culinary metaphor referring to the blend of various cinematic ingredients such as comedy, action, romance, etc. (2011: 7).

19. The song *Ek panchhi banke* introduces us to the character Meera. Meera is shown singing and dancing in a deserted landscape all by herself, followed by her tumble into the lake.

20. In an elaborate sequence in *Purana Mandir* (1984), Ramsay Brothers make a mockery of blockbuster film *Sholay* (dir: Ramesh Sippy; 1975). This is used as comic relief for the audience, without bearing any relevance to the original storyline. Although an absence of integrated film text was common in many 'masala' films of other genres (such as Dara Singh action films) throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, in Ramsay horror the films became a potpourri—a blend of horror, sex and comedy. Linda Williams also brings the genre of horror under the ambit of 'body genres'. She states that the display of the body here works as 'excesses' in the form of body spectacle and runs parallel to the central narrative (Williams, 1991).

21. In this regard, Gopal states that 'films like *Mahal* (dir: Kamal Amrohi; 1949), *Madhumati* (dir: Bimal Roy; 1958), *Bees Saal Baad* (dir: Biren Nag; 1962) and *Bhoot Bangla* (dir: Mehmood; 1965) were less concerned with the horrific than with the extra-empirical dimension of the human—*bhatki hui aatma* (lost souls), reincarnation, salvation—and with the manipulation of the ghostly by evil human agents' (2011: 93).

22. Tulsi Ramsay states that the violence and the erotic sequences of Ramsay Brothers films were most appealing to the working-class male audience. Therefore, the films were screened at semi-urban/rural movie theatres, targeting essentially the working-class male population. To quote Tulsi Ramsay '…If the daughter-in-law (bahu) wearing lots of gold jewelry came in a Mercedes, she wouldn't be able to digest our films' (Tulsi Ramsay, as cited in Sen [2017]).

23. ZHS by Zee Network, for example, was a low-budget production (Nair, 2012).

24. The first episode of ZHS called *Dastak* (1993) was a murder mystery in which a husband kills his wife and remarries, after which the wife returns to avenge her death in the form of a ghost.

25. Sangita Gopal states that RGV horror films are a product of the 'Hollywood inflected idiom of horror' (2011: 101). However, the use of genre-specific camera and sound technique does not necessarily make it imitative. Instead, it reflects on the changing audience imagination of Hindi cinema now targeting the overseas market. Also, as pointed out by Tejaswini Ganti, post-1990s the genre changed its audience configuration from 'masses' to 'classes' (2012).

26. Post-liberalisation, the overseas territory became the most rewarding financially, with the United Kingdom and the United States of America becoming important markets for Hindi cinema.

27. Post-1990s, as the 'system of production' changed with the neo-liberal policies adopted by the Indian government, 'family feudal romances' mutated to 'NRI romances' (Mukherjee, 2009). Films such as *Hum Aapke Hain Kaun* (dir: Sooraj Barjatya; 1994), *Dilwale Dulhania Le Jayege* (dir: Aditya Chopra; 1995), *Kuch Kuch Hota Hai* (dir: Karan Johar; 1998) and *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham* (dir: Karan Johar; 2001) adhere to the form of visual excess, extravagant cinematography and designer mise en scène, with the non-resident Indian (NRI) at the centre of the narrative.

28. With economic liberalisation, various luxury and lifestyle brands were looking for newer markets in the Indian territory. As a result, it became a necessity for the entry-level international brands—e.g., Mc Donald's, Coca Cola, Benetton, among others—to legitimise the consumer culture in India. It was in this legitimisation process that international brands took resort to Hindi cinema to gain greater visibility and establish brand equity in the Indian market. Furthermore, the flooding of Indian markets with foreign goods led to the formulation of a consumption-based economy.

29. RGV also made films like *Rangeela* (1995) and *Mast* (1999) belonging to the genre of romance. Both films were box office successes. *Rangeela* bagged several Filmfare awards.

30. At its embryonic stage, multiplexes created an avenue for films catering to a 'niche' audience, with sensibilities which operate outside the erstwhile

commercial circuit. Gopal also re-imagines the constitution of the audiences of Hindi cinema with the multiplex mode of exhibition in India. She notes that with multiplexes, cinema does not remain a 'populist medium' (2011). Multiplex cinema has an aesthetic form that uniquely addresses the multiplex audience. However, since 2010, with the rapid decline of single-screen theatres, the second phase of multiplex evolution has started. In this phase, multiplexes have transformed from an exclusive to a more universal way of theatrical film viewing in India.

31. This is also relevant in the case of recently released horror web series on Netflix, e.g., *Ghoul* (dir: Patrick Graham; 2018) and *Betaal* (dir: Patrick Graham; 2020). Set in a dystopian land*, Ghoul*, instead of borrowing from Indian folklore, employs demons from Arabian and Persian folklore. The web series *Betaal* also departs from the chudail and bhatakti aatma, using the zombie trope to create horror.

REFERENCES

Belton, John. 2012. 'Introduction: Digital Cinema', *Film History*, 24 (2): 131–34.

———. 2002. 'Digital Cinema: A False Revolution', *October*, 100: 99–144. http://www.jstore.org/stable/779094.

Creative Mornings HQ. 2014. 'Ashim Ahluwalia: Miss Lovely' [Video File], 7 May. www.youtube.com/watch?v=56MLHR7wlw8. Accessed on 18 January 2021.

Ganti, Tejaswini. 2012. *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan.

Gopal, Sangita. 2011. *Conjugations: Marriage and Form in New Bollywood Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Hoek, Lotte. 2014. *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Manovich, Lev. 1999. 'What is Digital Cinema?', in Peter Lunenfield (ed.), *The Digital Dialectic: New Essays on New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press: 172–98.

Mazumdar, Ranjani. 2008. 'Spectacle and Death in the Archive of Bombay Cinema', in G. Prakash and K. M. Kruse (eds.), *The Spaces of the Modern City: Imaginaries, Politics, and Everyday Life*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 401–32.

Mubarki, Meraj Ahmed. 2016. *Hindi Cinema, Ghost and Ideologies*. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

Mukherjee, Madhuja. 2015. 'Of Recollection, Retelling, and Cinephilia: Reading *Gangs of Wasseypur* as an Active Archive of Popular Cinema', *Journals of Moving Images*. http://jmionline.org/articles/2015/of_recollection_retelling_and_cinephilia_reading_gangs_of_wasseypur_as_an.pdf. Accessed on 7 November 2016.

———. 2009. 'Photoshop Landscapes: Digital Mediation and Bollywood Cities', *Journal of Moving Images*, 8. http://jmionline.org/article/photoshop_landscapes_digital_mediation_and_bollywood_cities. Accessed on 7 November 2016.

Nair, Kartik. 2012. 'Taste, Taboo, Trash: The Story of the Ramsay Brothers', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 3 (2): 123–45.

Prince, Stephen. 1996. 'True Lies: Perceptual Realism, Digital Images, and Film Theory', *Film Quarterly,* 49: 27–37.

———. 2012. *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality*. London: Rutgers University Press.

Red Chillies Entertainment. 2018. 'Om Shanti Om | Behind the Scenes | Visual Effects | Shah Rukh Khan, Deepika Padukone' [Video File], 20 April. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=udvFdNULnM4. Accessed on 18 January 2021.

Sawhney, Rashmi. 2014. 'An Evening on Mars, Love on the Moon: 1960s Science Fiction Films from Bombay', *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*, 6 (2): 121–46.

Sen, Maheli. 2017. *Haunting Bollywood: Gender, Genre, and the Supernatural in Hindi Commercial Cinema*. USA: University of Texas Press.

VCL Tata Elxsi. 2018. 'VFX Reel June 2018' [Video File]. 9 July. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RQgkQ2-ojUI. Accessed on 18 January 2021.

Vidal, Belén. 2017. 'Cinephilia Goes Global: Loving Cinema in the Post-cinematic Age', in Rob Stone, Paul Cooke, Stephanie Dennison and Alex Marlow-Mann (eds.), *The Routledge Companion to World Cinema* (1st ed.) (Remapping World Cinema). Oxon and New York: Routledge: 404–41.

Vitali, Valentina. 2008. *Hindi Action Cinema: Industries, Narratives, Bodies*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Williams, Linda. 1991. 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44 (4): 2–13.

Wood, Aylish. 2002. 'Timespaces in Spectacular Cinema: Crossing the Great Divide of Spectacle Versus Narrative', *Screen,* 43 (4): 370–73.

◆◆

TOWARDS STANDARDISATION
Notes on the Indian SVOD Production Apparatus

ISHITA TIWARY

I n the spring/summer of 2020, as the coronavirus pandemic raged across the world, media industries found themselves shutting down their ongoing productions. Personnel involved in these projects found themselves at home. Moreover, in the wake of lockdown restrictions and the closure of cinemas, binge-watching practices on streaming platforms had increased across the globe. In India, the shutting down of cinema halls had monetary repercussions for producers, who then started turning to Over the Top (OTT) platforms to release their films. The trend started with Shoojit Sircar's *Gulabo Sitabo* (2020) that was released on Amazon Prime Video. Intrigued by this new development, I sought to discover if the practices of Streaming Video on Demand (SVOD) platforms have had any impact on the Indian film industry. Over a span of three months, I spoke to cinematographers, editors, assistant directors, line producers, executive producers and writers. In particular, I focused on the production practices of two SVOD platforms: Amazon Prime Video and Netflix.

I begin with the example of *Tandav* (2021), a mega-budget series on Prime Video, starring Saif Ali Khan, and directed by Bollywood film director Ali Abbas Zafar. This example illustrates the scale and scope of web productions as well as the issues I delineate in this article, viz., the standardisation of technical production practices, crew composition, its impact on content creation, and its success. I spoke to Saurabh Kumar, long-time Assistant Director to Zafar, who explained the process of making *Tandav*:

> *Tandav* was a drama....Our point was to make things, and the cast, very rich looking....Huge crowds, 2,000–2,500 juniors on sets....

> There was the presence of huge stars, such as Saif, and senior actors who were also cast members on the show. Amazon was creatively involved from the beginning. Our director already had stature in the industry, hence there were no restrictions on us…[I] don't know if it can be said for other platforms.[1]

Scholarship on production practices in Indian cinema has focused largely on the Bombay film industry, following liberalisation measures of the 1990s. The theoretical focus has been on the manner in which this experience creates modes and zones of cultural production in the industry (Prasad, 1998; Rajadhyaksha, 2003; Ganti, 2012). In this paper, I place my interviews with professionals—who traverse both cinematic and SVOD productions in conversation—along with this literature, to capture modes of transformation in not only production practices, but also the future it might entail for the industry as well as the study of production practices in Indian film studies.

STANDARDISATION OF PRODUCTION

The Indian film industry functions with a heterogeneous model of production, i.e., there is fragmentation of the production apparatus, and there exists a functional centrality of the distributor–financier figure to the process of filmmaking (Prasad, 1998). This disaggregated process ensures that the finished film text presented on screen is not the most important part of the filmmaking process, but is on par with other modes of production (ibid.). Moreover, the studio system did not monopolise the film business in Indian film production practices, but, rather, the lack of control over distribution and exhibition intensified the dispersed mode of production (Barnouw and Krishnaswamy, 1980; Prasad, 1998). I would like to engage this idea of disaggregation and dispersion in conversation with the standardisation measures introduced by SVOD platforms, and posit that SVOD platform practices emerge from the oppositional tensions that lie between the processes of standardisation and disaggregation.

Aastha Toprani, the line producer for *Tandav*, noted that pre-production for the show was similar to that of a regular Bollywood production. However, every level of decision making—financials, creatives, etc.—needed Amazon's approval. At times, a representative

from Amazon would visit the production set as an observer. When it came to shooting, the duration depended on the budget of the show (small, medium, big). Cinematographer Ankit Mhatre, speaking from his experience of working for both television and OTT platforms, observed that the shooting structure of streaming platforms lay somewhere between a television production and a feature film. For instance,

> [A] show might have 8 episodes for 22 mins; it would take 15–20 days to shoot. In *Pushpavalli* (dir: Shani; 2017), which I shot, the first season was shot in 15 days, and the next in 25 days. This happened because the budget of the production increased, and we graduated from shooting on simple cameras to Alexa.[2]

These changes took place as *Pushpavalli* became a sleeper hit in Season 1. The production house had more funds and thus gave the writers more time to polish content for the audience.

The streamlining of production practices leads to a standardisation of infrastructure. Dharam Soni (Head of Production, Red Chillies Entertainment) states:

> Production was such a grey area at one point of time in Bollywood. There was the fudging of funds, management/mismanagement; very few in the industry had a handle on this. When these guys came (Netflix, Amazon), they brought systems along with them that made you literate, such as conducting budget workshops, inviting producers, organising technical sessions for VFX and sound FX, and introducing the writer's room.[3]

This is echoed on the technical side by cinematographers and editors as well. Mhatre notes:

> Netflix is the strictest right now. All shows have to be shot on 4k minimum, not HD. The use of RED and Alexa cameras is mandatory. On the other hand, Amazon Prime and Hotstar require HD as the bare minimum. The streaming platforms want to stream at 16:9 ratio and discourage shooting on cinemascope, as cinemascope gives bands that are theatrical, unlike 16:9 which covers all platforms.[4]

Shruti Bora, editor of the recent Netflix hit, *Masaba Masaba* (dir: Sonam Nair; 2020), and *Little Things* (dir: Ajay Bhuyan and Ruchir Arun; 2016), described the editing process.

> Netflix asks for at least two editors. The episodes are divided between them; the editors work on the individual episodes. They then watch it together to figure out the flow, what is missing, what is working, where there is lag, if there are sequences which zone people out. The edits then go for a round of feedback to the people on the production team as well as the OTT platform. Then there is a round of discussion amongst all parties. Once we are sure about the edits, we lock them and send it to the sound designer and musician. Post the sound design, the content might come back to the editor for a final look, depending on time, as these platforms have tight deadlines.[5]

Soni sums it up succinctly:

> These platforms keep updating, keep doing refreshers, keep doing checks, and by default you are in the loop. The international streaming platforms are very hands on, and have stringent quality controls/checks and are actively involved with the production team on the creative and technical front.[6]

As is apparent from these examples, there is an emphasis on standardising the production process. Moreover, after the corporatisation of the film industry there has been an increasing integration of production, distribution and exhibition apparatuses, with discourses of professionalisation and modernisation entering the vocabulary (Ganti, 2012). While the distributor–financier (in the SVOD platform) remains central, we see shifts in this heterogeneous model of filmmaking, which is slowly moving towards processes of standardisation, while also channelling the new impulse created by the corporatisation of the film industry. These new models bring to mind the organisation of production in Hollywood—where there is detailed division of labour—and the approximation of features of the serial manufacture of mass production (Janet Staiger, cited in Prasad, 1998).

The advent of SVOD platforms in India has led to an expansion of employment opportunities across media industries.

The crew composition of these platforms consists of personnel experienced in both film and television as well as fresh film school graduates. Moreover, streaming platforms, as Mhatre informs me, offer his cinephile generation an opportunity to experiment with content and form. In the last decade, the inflow of foreign capital into the Bombay film industry has resulted in leaner productions, and an increase in non-Indian film workers, both in overseas and domestic location shootings (Kaur, 2020). The hiring of non-domestic workers is linked to notions of professionalism. Training in filmmaking in India, Ganti notes, has primarily been through apprenticeship (2012). While such impulses are certainly present in the SVOD platform, it seems more open to domestic workers, especially those trained at film schools. It is also important to remember that these platforms function as schools as well, as they offer training programmes in various aspects of filmmaking. However, the entry to newcomers is restricted at certain levels when it comes to big-budget shows. Kumar points out that older crew, such as those operating boom mikes, focus pullers, sound recordists, come with experience, 'and these are departments which have no place to spend time on mistakes'.[7] Newer crew get hired on lower-budget shows, and thus have the latitude to learn from mistakes. Toprani partially concurs with Kumar. She expands his point by stating that web-show productions require film-literate and film-educated personnel for the betterment of the project, and are the space for fresh film school graduates. The proliferation of film schools in the country has supplied SVOD platforms with this new pool of talent for their productions.

But such standardisation comes embedded with limitations and contradictions, especially when it comes to viewing the final content. Mhatre describes stressful moments while shooting and grading *Pushpavalli*. The graded image was viewed on professional monitors. However, the same image looked different on mobile phones, iPads, laptops, television screens. This made him wonder: 'What was the benchmark? That siren kept going in my head; it was red alert.'[8] To standardise the image, he, along with the director of the show, decided to use mobile phones as the base. As creators of the show, they were aware that in all likelihood many audience members would watch the show on their phones. While grading is very important, Mhatre points out that the image is not merely about colours, but includes information given to the audience. For instance, he cites the example of a stand-up comedy show he had shot that employed cue cards. The text on these cue cards had to be large enough for the audience to read, irrespective of the screen on which they were watching the show. He notes that it is very difficult to standardise and grade as the image appears different on an Android device as opposed to an Apple device. However, these rules of standardisation do not apply when big Bollywood filmmakers shoot shows for these platforms. For example, *Sacred Games* (dir: Anurag Kashyap and Vikramaditya Motwane; 2018) and *Made in Heaven* (dir: Zoya Akhtar, Nitya Mehra, Prashant Nair and Alankrita Shrivastava; 2019) were shot on Cinemascope. This alerts us to processes of standardisation that apply to newer crew, but established filmmakers from the Hindi film industry, who are high up in hierarchy, are given creative control. Thus, while the standardisation of production is creating a detailed division of labour transparency in budgets and encouraging newer crew, standardisation of the image is still undergoing a process of *becoming* on account of the platforms' newer technology and dispersed viewing apparatuses.

STANDARDISATION OF CONTENT

One common aspect that emerged from my interviews was the freedom offered by streaming platforms when it came to content. According to Soni:

> The freedom I have experienced with them (streaming platforms) when it came to reading the script, thinking it through creatively, the cost variances involved, etc., they (streaming platforms) were very accommodating and seem to understand creative diversions.[9]

Mhatre further adds that streaming platforms were different two years ago.

> It was very niche, now it's becoming mainstream. The monitors are now phones. There is experimentation with content, which we don't see on TV, because it's massy. On these platforms, the storyline can be offbeat/wacky, which a mainstream audience might not accept, but this show will find a niche audience online.[10]

He contrasts this with his experience of shooting for a TV show:

> For example, writers came with the script on the day of the shoot, we would not know how the larger storyline would pan out. On a streaming platform, while you are not getting time to shoot it as a feature, you can experiment, have time to light up, actors have time to perform.[11]

What Mhatre notices is the flexibility and latitude that streaming platforms are offering filmmakers. It is this point about flexibility that I wish to bring in dialogue with the tight control over the making of content exerted by the standardisation impulse of these platforms.

But this freedom, while appearing ideal, does not capture the complete picture. International streaming platforms tend to self-regulate and censor content in India. For example, it is now widely known that Amazon Prime Video took the self-censorship route when it entered the Indian market. Frontal nudity, vulgar language, or subject matter that was religiously or politically sensitive were all matters for self-censorship. For example, one of the episodes of the motoring show, *The Grand Tour* (dir: Phil Churchward, Brian Klein, Kit Lynch-Robinson and Gavin Whitehead; 2016), is listed as 30 minutes long on Amazon Prime, while the original is in fact one hour. The half-hour difference is the sum of cuts made to remove all references to a car made of meat. Nude scenes in TV shows, such as *Californication* (2007–2014) and *The Man in The High Castle* (2015–2019), were found to be blurred or pixelated. In India, cinema is still considered the one mass medium that reaches everybody, with immense cultural influence. This explains the reasons why cinema is subject to elaborate censorship mechanisms, and why, too, these regulatory mechanisms create debate in the public sphere. Through the censoring of cinema, the state performs its performative dispensation to its claim of sovereign power and also as management of public affect.[12] While SVOD platforms are not a mass medium on the scale of cinema, it is important to note that censorship codes in India are governed by the Indian Cinematograph Act and the Cable Television Act. Web content currently does not have any such censorship codes to adhere to. In India, streaming platforms, such as Netflix and Hotstar, are in favour of an industry censorship code

akin to the one that exists in Southeast Asian nations with Netflix, Fox and Walt Disney. Such a move has been prompted by the SVOD platforms' anticipation of the Indian government's own rules, which they fear will be detrimental to the industry. In anticipation, SVOD platforms would prefer to develop their own voluntary mode of regulation. This ties in to the standardisation impulse of platforms, where content is vetted during production, and solutions to potential problems are offered by in-house legal teams. However, from November 2020 onwards, all SVOD platforms are under regulation by the Information and Broadcasting Ministry, and it will be interesting to observe how these new regulations will impact the storytelling and production decisions of SVOD platforms in India.[13]

I illustrate this tension with the example of *Tandav*, and the hit web series *Paatal Lok* (dir: Avinash Arun and Prosit Roy; 2020). Kumar points out that Amazon did provide content recommendations for *Tandav*. 'For instance, if a particular thing in the script could put us in a legal problem, they would come back with a solution, and it would be up to the director to accept it.'[14] Toprani adds details to this point:

> In a normal studio film, we could take decisions on our own. In the case of Amazon, they take the content to the LA team and revert to us. After that we get back to them and then the legal team comes in, etc. Hence, this delays the production process and sometimes leads to miscommunication as well.[15]

She notes that this process creates much back and forth movement, involving approvals from the LA team as well as the legal team, which can be potentially frustrating since everything is conducted over telephone. For instance, certain matters approved at the scripting stage by the platform could well be rejected at a later point for fear of a public backlash. What is this backlash? Since *Paatal Lok*, there has been much monitoring of content because the show received blowback from Hindu right-wing groups and was subject to legal notices. As a result, the platform intensified restrictions on ongoing productions, even though no censorship code exists. Toprani recalls how they were cajoled by the legal and marketing teams during production: '*aap aisa karo; aapke* interest *main hi rahega*' (you should follow what we are suggesting; it would be in

your interest).[16] The fear of backlash is also leading to changes in the kind of content that is being commissioned. Manoj Rahul, who prepares research bibles of web shows and films under development, is frustrated by the platforms' preference for commissioning adaptations over original content as it seems safer, and legal issues can be anticipated and resolved beforehand.[17] The issues of content commissioning and censorship enunciate the contradictions embedded in the standardisation model, in which there are limits to creating niche, experimental, offbeat content, as long as it does not offend those in power. The standardisation of content becomes a complex interplay of creativity, streamlined processes and balancing public sentiment.

LOOKING TOWARDS THE HORIZON

During the pandemic, the film industry was brought to existential panic as cinemas were being closed, and filmmakers and production houses were turning towards streaming platforms to release their films. While the mega-budget releases were still being held up, medium-budget, content-driven films found themselves on these platforms. Drawing a parallel with the multiplex moment, Mhatre states that the pandemic has emphasised the 'bitter truth'—that the multiplex model worked only for big-budget films.[18] Initially meant to promote alternate cinema, the scenario today is such that a film with a big star can command 13 shows a day, while a small-budget indie will be allotted one show. The model has now become a 'cash machine'. As these films now find themselves on streaming platforms, they encounter different metrics of success.

The metrics of determining success on streaming platforms offer us some clues as to what future transformations might entail. Streaming platforms are notorious for hiding viewership metrics. While Netflix today hosts a top-10 section on its main interface, other platforms do not. It is difficult to tell what constitutes 'success'. Speaking to my respondents, what emerges as the consensus is that social media engagement, in the form of sharing stories and re-tweeting, seems to be a base metric to measure success. Bora, who edited *Masaba, Masaba*, observes that it has been her most successful project. It was so popular on social media that she received numerous friend requests on Facebook, with people writing to her about the show. Kumar concurs, and notes that the unofficial marker

for the success of a show is the meme market. Soni adds nuance to this scenario by noting that each platform has its own class of audience and follows the feedback of its production on social media. At this point, while it is difficult to pinpoint how this social media buzz translates into economic value, it does confer success in terms of creative labour capital to these professionals as they navigate the media industry for job opportunities.

Making a comparison with film, Kumar notes that success can be predicted through a digital ticketing system, which estimates box office numbers. In television, however, it is the TRP, which includes a sample of viewers, and the assumption that the sample is a marker of the broader audience and its viewing patterns. In the case of streaming platforms in India, a company called Ormax conducts the survey.

> Platforms are suspiciously weird about putting out numbers. For instance, a show with a headline cast will immediately attract big numbers. But if the viewership keeps declining 2–3 episodes later, chances are it won't be renewed...*Pushpavalli* got sanctioned for another season, as its viewership numbers were consistent from first to last episode.[19]

Kumar foresees that web shows and films will henceforth function on the principle of the release date.

> In coming times, as web shows start getting popular, people will be in the zone of Season 1 and Season 2. Announcing the release date would become a norm. The release announcements of some shows/films would be anticipated by the audience.[20]

I now circle back to Mhatre's and Soni's comments on the segmentation of audiences, and failures of the multiplex model. Most of my interviewees drew parallels between the multiplex moment and the current SVOD moment. The multiplex model emerged with the 1990s' liberalisation measures, when consumers had disposable incomes. Patterned on the shopping mall model, the multiplex included mainstream—both domestic and foreign—releases, and regional and art cinema. The model stabilised and appropriated varying audience segments (Sharma, 2003). Primarily urban, the

multiplex space was meant for privileged classes, and appealed to their sense of entitlement and segregation from the masses (Athique, 2011). Academic interventions on the multiplex model have been retrospective. However, they do provide insights into audience segmentation, and its relationship with content creation, and the notion of viewing practices and spaces vis à vis streaming platforms.

This segmentation is currently fuelling the commissioning, and production, of 'offbeat content' on OTT platforms. As an indie producer, Toprani recalls receiving unusual scripts that were slow burn, gritty, infused with dark humour. However, such films commanded no finances at the time. That has now changed with the advent of OTT platforms, and these films are being released since they are likely to find an audience on such niche platforms. The OTT platforms are thus giving a platform to indie filmmakers and smaller production houses—so runs the claim. Both Toprani and Mhatre stress that this niche audience, with its desire for unusual content, once cultivated by the multiplex, has now been transferred to OTT platforms. Bora cites the example of the recently released Netflix horror film *Raat Akeli Hai* (dir: Honey Trehan; 2020) that would not have survived in a multiplex today as it would have been considered a risky proposition. To drive home their point, most of my respondents agreed that in today's scenario, a *Gangs of Wasseypur* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2012) would not be released as a two-part film, but as a batch of 10 episodes of 45 minutes each. Filmmakers have always had a voice; the OTT platforms, they noted, are giving extensions to them. The comments of these professionals, when placed in light of standardisation measures, produce a tension between this sense of buoyancy and control over content production. While I cannot make any concrete claims for the time being, it would be productive to chart these tensions and juxtapose this narrative to that which was in place with the arrival of the multiplex in India.

Kumar notes that there is a great deal of competition in the market. Currently, India's population comprises 54 per cent youth, who are demanding more and more content:

> They have no free time to go to a cinema hall, and want a variety of content. They would not see something similar to *Paatal Lok* some time ago….The same platform also hosts content like *Comicstaan*

(dir: Khuzema Haveliwala; 2018–2019), where stand-up comics come and speak to me on a platform. If I don't like an act, I can skip it. It is giving approach to the international market as well—e.g., *Pataal Lok* being available internationally—as well as access to international content. To get all this content at just a click is the USP of this platform.[20]

Kumar's comments also bring me to the issue of the infrastructure of the platform. The Indian market is home to 460 million Internet users, second only to China's 721 million-user base. According to the 2018 FICCI Frames Study, there are approximately two million paid digital subscribers across application providers, including video platforms, and 1–1.5 million customers who have moved entirely to digital media (mobile telephony, Internet).[21] OTT video revenue in India was pegged at ₹2,019 crore (around $290 million) in 2017, according to a KPMG report. It is expected to reach ₹5,595 crore (around $776 million) by 2022, and to grow 45 per cent annually through 2023, helped by the rising adoption of smartphones, smart TVs and other devices.[22]

I emphasise these infrastructural changes as they are crucial to the production apparatus of SVOD platforms, and how they might lead to changes within the Indian media industry. These infrastructural changes point to the lucrativeness of the Indian SVOD market and the possibility of its expansion. This is leading not only to a proliferation of streaming platforms, but also to the commissioning of content for production on a larger scale. International platforms are attracting personnel from the Bombay film industry as well as professional film schools, and introducing methods of streamlining production processes. All my respondents were of the view that these new practices introduced by SVOD platforms are unlikely to impact the Bombay film industry that functions on decades-long, established patterns of operation. This oppositional tension—between the standardisation of SVOD platforms and Bollywood's heterogeneous modes of production—conceivably has parallels with the shift created by the multiplex moment, which was grasped by the industry only much after. It is entirely possible that one might start noticing a change in the production apparatus of the film industry following modifications introduced by the platforms, the dependency of filmmakers on these platforms, and the effects of the pandemic.

What does this signify for a scholar engaged in this study? As noted earlier, scholarship on the industry has largely focused on the relationship between film production and the moment of liberalisation. The study of SVOD platforms makes a case for the examination of media content as an intermedial constellation, which, when studied through a combination of approaches—archival/ethnographic/textual analysis—reveals the complex interplay between the film industry, new media technologies, the apparatus for production and labour, and the commissioning of content.

◆

NOTES

1. Interview with Saurabh Kumar, 30 July 2020.
2. Interview with Ankit Mhatre, 29 July 2020.
3. Interview with Dharam Soni, 20 August 2020.
4. Interview with Ankit Mhatre, 29 July 2020.
5. Interview with Shruti Bora, 8 September 2020.
6. Interview with Dharam Soni, 20 August 2020.
7. Interview with Saurabh Kumar, 30 July 2020.
8. Interview with Ankit Mhatre, 29 July 2020.
9. Interview with Dharam Soni, 20 August 2020.
10. Interview with Ankit Mhatre, 29 July 2020.
11. *Ibid.*
12. See Mazzarella (2013). Situating his work in the 1990s, when the Vajpayee-led NDA government was in power, Mazzarella noticed that censorship struggles illustrated the tensions between the process of liberalisation and the opening up of the Indian consumer market on the one hand, and the rise of conservative Hindu nationalism, on the other.
13. The new guidelines are called the Guidelines for Intermediaries and Digital Media Ethics Code. It requires SVOD platforms to classify content, provide mechanisms for parental lock, follow the ethics code laid down by Press Council of India, set up a grievance redressal office in India, and establish a three-level grievance redressal. For more, see *HT Tech*, 'India's New Rules for OTT Platforms: 7 Important Things to Know'. https://tech.hindustantimes.com/tech/news/indias-new-rules-for-social-media-ott-platforms-7-important-things-to-know-71614260212306.html. Accessed on 8 March 2021.
14. Interview with Saurabh Kumar, 30 July 2020.
15. Interview with Aastha Toprani, 23 August 2020.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Interview with Manoj Rahul, 1 August 2020. A research bible is now becoming standard practice across film and SVOD industries. It is a dossier that includes research work on the era, costumes, architecture, etc., before production begins. The research work becomes a base for multiple departments of a film/TV series, such as production design, costume design, scriptwriting, score, etc.
18. Interview with Ankit Mhatre, 29 July 2020.
19. Interview with Saurabh Kumar, 30 July 2020.
20. *Ibid.*
21. See http://ficci.in/spdocument/22949/FICCI-study1-frames-2018.pdf. Accessed on 11 March 2021.
22. See https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/in/pdf/2018/09/Media-ecosystems-The-walls-fall-down.pdf. Accessed on 11 March 2021.

REFERENCES

Athique, Adrian. 2011. 'From Cinema Hall to Multiplex: A Public History', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 9 (2): 147–60.

Barnouw, Erik and S. Krishnaswamy. 1980. *Indian Film*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Ganti, Tejaswini. 2012. *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Kaur, Pawanpreet. 2020. 'If Globalization is Happening, it Should Work Both Ways: Race, Labour, and Resistance among Bollywood's Stunt Workers', *Media Industries Journal*, 7 (1).

Mazzarella, William. 2013. *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Prasad, M. Madhav. 1998. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 2003. 'The Bollywood-ization of Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', *Inter Asia Cultural Studies*, 4 (1): 25–39.

Sharma, Aparna. 2003. 'India's Experience with the Multiplex', *Seminar,* 525.

◆◆

WHERE IS CINEMA?
COVID–19 and Shifts in India's Cinemascape

DARSHANA SREEDHAR MINI

In the wake of the COVID–19 lockdown and quarantine restrictions in India, the entertainment industry was faced with a sudden crisis, with postponements, shelving of projects and cancellation of production-related work becoming the norm. In response, the entertainment industry had to find workarounds to deal with such uncertainties and loss of employment. Some of the workarounds to such issues were creative—the pandemic saw the production of short films as well as creative solutions to the place-bound nature of filming by turning to mobile phone cameras and online platforms, such as Zoom, which were used to improvise on form and content. As a corollary, economic arrangements and care networks were forged to collectively pool in financial support for those who were out of work. Such crisis narratives are important, as are the longstanding structural inequalities they expose (such as the precarious position of below-the-line workers). But what is also thrown into sharp relief is the manner in which the crisis itself engenders new forms of improvisation and experimentation with already existing models of production and circulation, as well as such newer formats as Over-the-Top (OTT) platforms to mobilise a diverse viewership.

While the dislocation of cinema from the film theatre has been many years in the making (think of the VHS and the DVD, for instance), the emergence of online streaming options in the last decade has threatened, for the first time, the theatre's status as the privileged ritual site (Lobato, 2019). This unmooring of cinema from its theatre-bound spatiality makes it a virtual object whose projection can be simulated on demand in the privacy of the home or on the mobile screen. The pandemic, even globally, has accelerated this process with requirements of social distancing. Such processes were also visibly in action in the Indian context, with OTT platforms assuming a far more crucial role in film and entertainment ecologies in the absence of theatrical screening. The closure of theatres boosted the use of OTT platforms, which, in turn, led to a steady increase in subscription rates during the lockdown. According to one report, the increase in OTT subscriptions grew 47 per cent in FY 2020, and digital revenue grew because OTT platforms are paying premium prices for digital rights to films in order to build their content library (KPMG, 2020).

OTT platforms, even prior to the lockdown, were being seen as cinematic extensions by filmmakers. This is complemented by shifts on the production end of the spectrum, with filmmakers turning to OTT platforms as an extension of their cinematic work in serialised format, as for instance, Netflix's *Sacred Games* (dir: Anurag Kashyap, Vikramaditya Motwane, Neeraj Ghaywan; 2018–2019) and Amazon's *Mirzapur* (dir: Karan Anshuman, Gurmmeet Singh; 2018). Until the pandemic, however, a delay of 42 days for a feature film's release on an OTT platform, following its theatrical release, was the accepted norm (Suri, 2021). The mandatory time gap between the theatrical release and OTT release was instituted to ensure fair competition and coexistence amongst different distribution platforms, without making one compete directly with the other. But with the onset of the pandemic-induced lockdown, many films that were awaiting theatrical release availed of an OTT release. Options of simultaneous release in theatres and OTT platforms are normally viewed with suspicion by both theatre owners and OTT corporates. The anxiety of the theatre and exhibitor associations following the lockdown emerges from concerns about the corporatisation of the entertainment sector that started with the multiplex wave in the early 2000s. OTT platforms opting for straight release replicate some of those issues, albeit in an online context. Film releases on Amazon and Netflix are seen by filmmakers as a way to cater to the changed circumstances wherein the viewer's ability to use the platform dictates the media content produced. Multiplex chains PVR and INOX were also equally disappointed with the straight release on OTT platforms, viewing it as a tendency that could cause radical (and, for them, unprofitable) shifts in the overall landscape of film

production. While conversations have been taking place among trade guilds regarding the impact of OTT platforms on the exhibition sector, the lockdown and the increase in subscriptions to OTT platforms means that it might not be just a temporary phenomenon.

According to the Broadcast Audience Research Council (BARC) of India and Neilson reports, overall television viewership, as well as average time spent per viewer watching TV (three hours and 51 minutes per day), increased during the pandemic (2020). While not a direct indicator of the statistics, such tendencies have indirectly bolstered the emergence of what has been called 'pandemic media' (Keidl and Melamed, 2020), ranging from news programmes and interviews focused on the virus, to advertising that uses the pandemic as a backdrop, to the film and television content that deal with new arrangements enforced by the pandemic. Recent scholarship has defined the study of pandemic media as being interested in the 'specific attitude(s) toward media in a moment of transition and uncertainty at a time of global health crisis' (ibid.). Following this trajectory, this paper locates the transitions in the Indian entertainment sectors during the pandemic with a specific focus on infrastructures, work, as well as the form of film itself. I show how the spatial logics of film production and viewership have undergone a transformation in terms of both 'virtual' and physical spaces. My approach to the 'virtual' here derives from the work of D. N. Rodowick, who writes: 'The inherent virtuality of the image is a fundamental condition of cinema viewing where the ontological insecurity of film as an aesthetic object is posed as both a spatial uncertainty and a temporal instability' (2007: 22). As I demonstrate in the following sections, the pandemic has intensified and accelerated the instability of cinema's spatial and temporal moorings in more ways than one.

PANDEMIC AESTHETICS?

While cinema's spatial logics have undergone changes, especially in relation to production and distribution infrastructures, it is also worth interrogating if the pandemic has been reflected in media content and aesthetic practices. On the production front, filmmakers have experimented with video–telephonic platforms, such as Zoom, to shoot films, while some others made use of computer screen-generated films. The lockdown also pushed filmmakers to be more creative in terms of how and where they could shoot, or the kinds

of scripts that were logistically possible to execute under these circumstances (Venkiteswaran, 2020).

In the early days of lockdown in April 2020, a multi-lingual short film, titled *Family* (dir: Prasoon Pandey; 2020), was released on YouTube and circulated as a public information segment intended to promote safety and social distancing practices. Produced by Sony Pictures Network India and Kalyan Jewellers, and featuring Amitabh Bachchan, Rajnikanth, Chiranjeevi, Mohanlal, Mammooty, Alia Bhatt, Ranbir Kapoor and Prosenjit Chatterjee, among others, the short film was produced to raise funds for the cine-workers whose employment opportunities had been affected as a result of the lockdown.[1] Publicised as a 'made-at-home short film', *Family* features sequences that were shot by actors based in different parts of India, but edited in such a way that it placed them as occupying shared narrative space. Interestingly, the characters speak their lines in their own language, reducing Hindi to one among the many regional languages spoken in India, as opposed to the prominence otherwise given to Hindi as a normative lingua franca. Subtitles in English connect the narrative, making the viewer aware of the constructed nature of the narrative and how linguistic diversity is enabled through star bodies.

Fig. 1: Screen grab from *Family*

Apart from the attempt to signify the unity of the Indian film industry in moments of crisis, Bachchan, as spokesperson, explains the film's mode of production to the viewers.

> We made this film together, but none of us ever stepped out of our respective houses. Every artist shot their own section in their own house. You, too, please stay indoors. That's the only way to keep yourself safe from this dangerous virus (ibid.).

Weaving in the message of having to stay indoors for one's own safety, the film extends the metaphor of unity to foreground the image of the Indian film industry as a united front that can mobilise its resources to fight the 'dangerous virus'. *Family* is not strictly a narrative film, but it is part of the category of informational films produced by film industry organisations during the pandemic for social awareness. In fact, what makes it distinct from other awareness campaigns is its insertion of cine-workers into the narrative of safety and survival during the pandemic.

Media content produced using Zoom or mobile camera phones had also started gaining popularity during the lockdown, some of them featuring pandemic-related content. Many of these are short films that make use of free platforms, such as YouTube, and gather a large viewership through online sharing practices. The short film *10th Day* (dir: Sajeev Khan A. R.; 2020) makes use of real footage from a treatment centre, featuring cast and crew who had tested positive and were in quarantine. The rhythm of life is captured through bonding and prayer services as they await results. It also explores the misconceptions about COVID–19, and how it pans out into tensions among family members. Similar to *Family*, the mode of production in *10th Day* is inserted into the film as text: 'A film that portrays the real incidents that took place in a quarantine centre. The production of the film, including the concept, storyboard, shooting and editing were completed in three days.'[2] If *Family* uses the figure of Bachchan as a symbolic patriarch, verbalising the logics behind the production, *10th Day* does it through textual elements. The film uses timestamps to showcase happenings in a temporary shelter as in-patients wait for their quarantine and test results. While *Family* and *10th Day* might have different production values—one produced by a corporate entity, and the other, an independent venture—they are united by a demand that the viewer be cognisant of the films' production mode. Further, this cognitive demand on the viewer also draws attention to the constricted production scenario in which filmmakers had to work, bypassing cinema's 'on-location' spatial norm. In general, cinema's ontology has always demanded a co-presence of at least the camera and the performer, while in these cases, 'social distancing' becomes a creative obstruction that leads to experiments with production as well as formal modes.
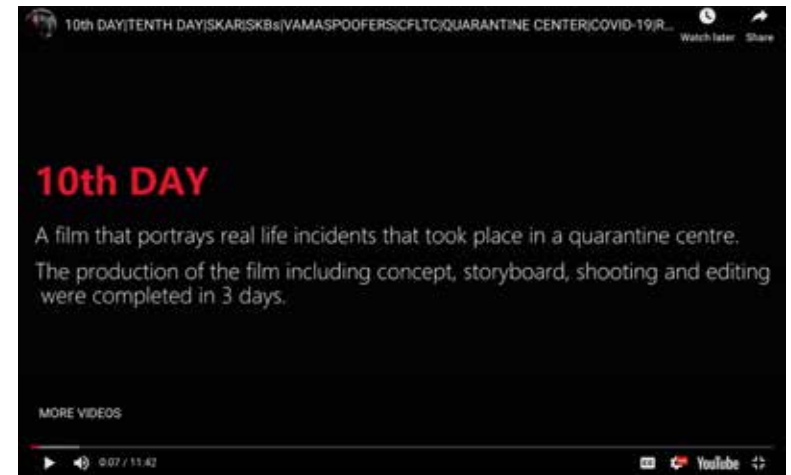
Fig. 2: Screen grab from *10th Day*

Many other films released during the pandemic also drew narrative references in their storylines to include trapped situations or isolated scenarios that removed crowd scenes or segments that involved intimacy. *Dots* (2020), an experimental, multi-lingual film directed by Singapore-based filmmaker Shilpa Krishnan Shukla, was one of the first Singaporean films to come out during the pandemic. The film narratively uses the pandemic as a premise for the story and connects 10 people via a fictional app called DOTS. The app pairs strangers for a two-hour chat, based on their mutual interests or preferences. The five pairs have different reasons to sign up for the app, and the film explores ideas of isolation, love, queer desire and aspirations. The film starts with the characters introducing themselves, sharing the preference options they had set up, and slowly opening up their personal and professional lives. Featuring Shishir Sharma, Marathi actresses Parna Pethe and Lalit Prabhakar, Malayalam actress Ahaana Krishna, and Tamil actor Raaghav Ranganathan among others, the film premiered online on YouTube on 13 June 2020. It has subsequently been picked up by ZEE5, as part of Global ZEE5 content procurement in which the director topped the list of winners. The actors shot the film on their mobile phones from their respective locations, while the director oversaw the shoot over a Zoom call. The film became quite popular on social media and was procured by ZEE5, giving way to music albums

Fig. 3: Publicity poster for *Dots* asking the viewers to pen their own experience of reconnecting with someone whom they have lost track of

inspired by it and other media components, such as response posts, which were used as publicity material for the film.

As opposed to *Dots*' independent film format, *C U Soon* (dir: Mahesh Narayan; 2020), produced by the actor couple Fahadh Faasil and Nazriya Nizam and released on Amazon Prime Video, was pitched as an experiment to see 'if they can come up with a new format' (Shanmugam, 2020). The film was supported for its experimental value by the Film Employee's Association of Kerala (FEFKA), despite the Kerala Film Producers Association's displeasure over new films being floated even as pending films were waiting to resume shoots. The exhibitor's association also expressed displeasure at the release, but Faasil pitched the film as made for home viewing,

as the 98-minute film was unlikely to be a viable format for theatrical exhibition, given Indian feature films' usual runtime of over two hours (ibid.). Shot almost entirely on an iPhone, *C U Soon* restricts most of its scenes to just one character, except those sequences that show the airport or police station, which were shot separately. Similar to the text notations in *Family* and *10th Day*, *C U Soon* begins with text that declares the safety protocols that were adhered to in the production of the film.

Publicised as a 'computer-screen movie', the narrative of *C U Soon* is peppered with visuals of video call windows (ibid.). The very title of the film draws from social media-propelled language in which phonemes are abridged, and vernacular and English languages mix together or are transcribed to convey meanings. The film centres on the life of a Dubai-based banker Jimmy (Roshan Mathews) who meets Anu (Darshana Rajendran) on Tinder, and falls in love with her after spending time with her on Google hangouts and Duo. He subsequently proposes to her, while remaining ignorant about her real identity or any other details apart from her Facebook profile and the video calls. Later, Jimmy gets into trouble when Anu goes missing after she leaves him a suicide note on WhatsApp. It is later revealed that Anu was a victim of sex trafficking, and she was using her relationship with Jimmy as a way out. In the initial scenes, shots of disappearing chat messages draw our attention to the ephemerality of these exchanges. Data assumes a crucial role in the film, as Anu's identity is solely built on how she uses materials such as photographs to weave an imaginary narrative of her family and background, drawing attention to what Larissa Hjorth and Sun Sun Lim refer to as the 'overlaying of the material-geographic and electronic-social' in the context of mobile intimacy (2012). The film works through the idea of distanced-proximity quite effectively, allowing the screen to shape and facilitate the intrusion of the viewer's gaze into the private spheres of the characters. The camera's intrusive gaze, through shots of their personal phones, brings us physically closer to the characters and privy to the shared intimacy between them. The viewer recalibrates their entry points into the narrative as the exchanges move between laptop screens to mobile phone screens as well as between various chat windows that are captured simultaneously.

Fig. 4: Publicity advertisement for *C U Soon*

While *C U Soon* is set predominantly in Dubai, viewers are made aware of different time zones and spatial dislocations through the Skype calls Jimmy makes to his mother, who is based in the United States, and to cousin Kevin (Fahadh Faasil) based in Kochi. *C U Soon* not only explores the mechanics of lockdown communication formats—as in *Dots*, when it restricts the narration by bringing strangers into a mediated space—but also gives the viewer a glimpse into transnational familial spaces to convey communication as a constant back-and-forth relationship haunted by an equally constant fear of breakdown. The film's use of the phone screen with characters posited on either side of the communication network makes a spatial demand on the viewer—albeit this time to inhabit the vantage point of one of the characters (Shrijith, 2020). As Kevin installs malware to hack into Anu's phone to track her down, the film encourages the viewer to identify with him, as he retraces her paths with the forensic eye of an investigator. There is a shifting sense of

identification that this offers to the viewer as the narrative frame of reference moves from Jimmy to Kevin in the first half, making Kevin the point of identification throughout the latter half of the film.

The spontaneity of the chat messages exchanged between the couple situates us as interlopers in the seemingly private space of the characters. In an interview, Roshan Mathews (the actor who played Jimmy) refers to the shoot for the film as similar to the recording of an 'audition tape'—the singularity of the experience that is distinct from the crowded schedules of shooting that animate film production. The idea of being alone as the actor delivers the lines, is something that connects *C U Soon* with *Dots*. Even though the viewer eventually perceives the scene as a cohesive whole, almost as spontaneous as real-time networked communication, these are carefully constructed sequences that involve staging and rehearsals.

The final film examined in this section, *Putham Pudhu Kaalai* (A Brand New Dawn), is a Tamil-language anthology film released on Amazon, which sets up its five segments in the backdrop of the COVID–19 lockdown in March 2020, and showcases characters who are stuck at home. Directed by five filmmakers—Sudha Kongara, Gautham Menon, Suhasini Maniratnam, Rajiv Menon, Karthik Subbaraj—each segment explores the impact of the lockdown on relationships, and how characters negotiate wait time to either resolve the impending tension or make drastic moves that could help them turn over a new leaf.

The fact that most segments of the film involve narratives centred on upper-class spaces (except Karthik Subbaraj's segment), is not lost on viewers, and has been widely discussed in the reviews of the film and in social media posts (Keramalu, 2020). The differential impact of COVID–19 on varied sections of the population— including migrants who were forced to walk long distances to return to their villages, and economic constraints on poor working-class populations—exposes the classified, gendered and racialised ramifications that it gives rise to in reinforcing social divisions. It is important to be mindful of the dangers in using the rhetoric of 'we are all in this together', as David Harvey points out, because it essentially negates the experience of those who cannot afford to take time off, because they do not have the luxury of staying at home (2020). Or, as Patricia Zimmerman and Caren Kaplan write in the context of coronavirus drone footage, despite the elegiac undertones

Fig. 5: Publicity poster of *Putham Pudhu Kaalai*

of 'melancholic nostalgia for what has been lost', such footage reveals that such 'romanticism is available only to the privileged with time to mediate on emptiness and revel on it' (2020). Questions about the positionality of the filmmaker and of the implicit addressee become crucial here, because they condition *whose* stories pandemic films can ultimately become.

Questions of class, in the case of *Putham Pudhu Kaalai*, are a caustic reminder of the relative privileges that allow filmmakers to engage in creative endeavours or collaborate with like-minded artists in their social circles. Even when the film industry reiterates that there is no caste discrimination in its hiring practices, it would be worth pondering how social circles and cliques allow opportunities and references that result in employment. *Family* and *C U Soon* make direct connections to the plight of cine-workers. In *Family*, Bachchan's character emphasises the reason the film was made, and the apparent oneness that marks the Indian film industry: 'We are all one family. But there is a larger family behind us who work for us—our workers, daily-wage earners who are facing difficulty now.' The public service announcement incorporated as part of the film focuses on the cine-worker who would be supported through funds raised with the help of sponsors and TV channels. Similarly, in *C U Soon*, the beginning of the film features text that states: 'While this lockdown pushed Malayalam cinema to a standstill, this film helped provide wages to a bunch of workers whose only source of income is cinema.' The producer Fahadh Faasil also donated ₹10 lakh from the profits of *C U Soon* to FEFKA, which was described by the FEFKA president as an expression of 'love and solidarity to their colleagues in the film industry during these times of paucity and survival' (*New Indian Express*, 2020). While the declarative gesture animated in these statements evokes the plight of the cine-worker, it also makes one wonder how such notional allegiance purportedly offers conditional privilege that can be easily withdrawn in a post-pandemic situation.

Thus, in constructing the pandemic as an exceptional circumstance that calls for extraordinary measures through such gestures, we should not lose sight of the utopian normalcy designated to the pre-COVID scenario, where labour conflicts are framed as aberrations that do not fit the bill. The stark wage gap between above-the-line and below-the-line units in the film industry puts questions

of safety and welfare to the backseat, leading to the occlusion of such issues from meriting systemic change. For instance, the occupational hazards that workers face in the industry, brought about by forcing them to take up risky endeavours that sabotage their long-term interest and welfare, puts them at a higher risk. Even in the arena of OTT platforms, since there is a third-party contract in commissioning content for Netflix and Amazon, there are discussions in trade guilds on how to ensure labour protection in the absence of accountability clauses that require the producer to clear all dues before receiving the censor certificate.[3] Despite discussions of the plight of the cine-worker as motivating the OTT films made during the pandemic, many of these films were shot with a reduced workforce and had to dispense with substantial portions of below-the-line workers because of quarantine restrictions. The lockdown and 'work-from-home' as the new normal have had differential impacts on workers, depending on who can afford to stay at home in quarantine, and who is left scraping to make ends meet when faced with unemployment.

CONCLUSION: WHERE IS CINEMA?

While the 'virtual' sites of cinematic exhibition have assumed prominence during the pandemic, cinema's physical spaces have also had to reorganise and catch up. We can plot these efforts at reorganisation along two axes—production and exhibition. In many countries, the entertainment industry has taken steps to resume production and exhibition in a phased manner. In the United States, for instance, in June 2020, the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers (AMPTP) released a white paper by the Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force, followed by the Return to Work Agreement outlining safety protocols agreed to by Screen Actor Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG–AFTRA), the Directors Guild of America and other unions (2020). The staged reopening process requires producers to ensure the availability of protective safety equipment, thermal screening and physical distancing protocols, including minimising instances of scenes involving fights, intimacy and crowds by amending scripts or using digital effects. The agreement emphasises the maintenance of a safe workspace, pitched as a 'shared' goal and responsibility. Apart from the lab-based PCR diagnostic kit for testing, the employees are also divided into

separate zones, depending on the number of people with whom they are in contact. Employees will be eligible for paid sick leave and quarantine pay. The COVID–19 compliance supervisor is another addition to safety protocols, and this official will be physically present during shoots to enforce regulations.

In India, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting has come up with standard operating procedures to aid film and television production.[4] This includes limiting crew to 33 per cent of pre-COVID strength, banning visitors on set, minimal sharing of equipment and gadgets, distancing protocols and operational control. Casting is to be done remotely, and all employees have to sign up for Arogya Setu, the app devised by the government to track and trace COVID–19 cases. The producers were even asked to ensure that a minimum of three washrooms be provided, and that sanitisation be done every hour. The pandemic-induced infrastructural changes are filling in a huge gap in sanitisation-related concerns, a moot point documented by director Opender Chanana whose *Living on the Edge: Deglamourisng Bollywood* (2017) showcases how safety-related concerns are unaddressed by the film industry.

Another document that offers risk-protection guidelines was developed by the Producers Guild of India. The report recommends, among other protocols, the securing of an Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) manager or a trained authorised person responsible for coordinating and supervising anti-contagion measures (Producers Guild of India, 2020). The report also recommends that the crew wear coloured bands to separate and identify their roles. In January 2021, the government announced that cinemas could operate at 100 per cent capacity from February 2021. The success of the Vijay-starrer *Master* in theatres (the film grossed $27 million in India before it moved to Amazon Prime) is seen as an indication of the new market considerations that need to be accounted for.

If production practices are conditioned through these protocols, on the exhibition front, too, provisions have been put in place to ensure safety and hygiene. Initially, China was one of the few countries to formulate restricted film viewing practices when India had gone into lockdown and theatres were shut down indefinitely. By filling only 30 per cent seats, Chinese theatres filled the mandatory empty seats with huggable stuffed animals that were disinfected after each screening (Baimbridge, 2020).

QR code-enabled tracking services were used to collect details of the patrons, a pattern that other countries have now started to replicate. In November 2020, cinemas in India started to reopen after a seven-month shutdown. The seating capacity was limited to 50 per cent, and safety protocols were being implemented. Similar to the use of surveillance and data aggregation in China to monitor theatre patrons, in India names and phone numbers are collected at the entrance for contact tracing. The pause in production means that new titles are not being produced as yet, and theatres might have to opt for re-releases. In India, where major releases coincide with the festival season, market considerations are premised on finding a balance between commercial appeal and generic considerations. The stall in production also means not knowing when full-force exhibition will resume.

Thus, pandemic entertainment has become a form where the product is redefining the market as much as market considerations are influencing film form. For instance, ad-supported video-on-demand has started to gain prominence alongside drive-ins and open-air cinemas. If OTT platforms and virtualisation point towards one possible future of film exhibition, the nod back to open-air cinemas reaches into the past to attempt to reframe the course of cinema's future through a *re-physicalisation*, not virtualisation, of its spaces.

However, while open-air cinemas go back to the culture of distribution associated with touring talkies that was common in the C-circuit exhibition networks mapped in the film *The Cinema Travellers* (dir: Amit Madheshiya and Shirley Abraham; 2016),[5] there is a crucial difference at this contemporary juncture. The resurrection of these practices during the pandemic is being done not by small-scale players, but by such multiplex chains as PVR Cinemas, INOX Leisure and Carnival Cinemas that are exploring the drive-in concept to generate revenue lost during the pandemic (Jha, 2020). PVR Cinemas, for instance, has come up with a drive-in theatre in Mumbai's Bandra–Kurla Complex, a business model used in India at the Sunset drive-in cinema in Ahmedabad and Prarthana Beach drive-in in Chennai, among others. The expansion of corporate players and multiplex chains into the terrain of the drive-in during the pandemic is both to explore the novelty of the concept, but also to gauge the viability of entertainment that goes beyond the spatial constraints of the cinema hall. Thus, while the

central ontological question in the postwar era of cinema, à la André Bazin, was 'What is Cinema', cinema during and after the pandemic might well be marked by a reformulation of this question, as 'Where is Cinema?'

◆

NOTES

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvb6yKtjez8. Accessed on 9 November 2020.
2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWQ8zRNIkWs&feature=emb_title. Accessed on 9 November 2020.
3. Telephonic Interview with B. Unnikrishnan, president of FEFKA.
4. 'Guiding Principles: To Restart Media Entertainment Industry in Maharashtra', Annexure A.

    https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/gr-annexure-a.pdf. Accessed on 12 November 2020.
5. For a study on different tiers of circulation practices in Indian film distribution, see Mini (forthcoming).

REFERENCES

Baimbridge, Richard. 2020. 'Here's What it's Like to Go See Movies in China and Why it Seems to be Working', *Indiawire,* 7 August. https://www.indiewire.com/2020/08/china-movie-theaters-reopen-1234578294/. Accessed on 22 November 2020.

BARC (Broadcast Audience Research Council) India and Neilson Media. 2020. 'Phenomenal Surge in Weekly TV Viewing Minutes (6%) and Weekly Time Spent per User on Smartphones (6.2%) Amidst the COVID–19 Pandemic', *Barcindia*. https://barcindia.co.in/announcement/phenomenal-surge-in-weekly-tv-viewing-minutes-6-percent-and-weekly-time-spent-per-user-on-smartphones-6-dot-2-percent-amidst-the-covid-19-pandemic.pdf. Accessed on 22 November 2020.

Harvey, David. 2020. 'Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID–19', *Jacobin Magazine*. 20 March. https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/DAVID-HARVEY-CORONAVIRUS-POLITICAL-ECONOMY-DISRUPTIONS Accessed on 19 November 2020.

Hjorth, Larissa and Sun Sun Lim. 2012. 'Mobile Intimacy in an Age of Affective Mobile Media', *Feminist Media Studies*, 12 (4): 477–84.

Industry-Wide Labor-Management Safety Committee Task Force. 2020. 'Proposed Health and Safety Guidelines for Motion Picture, Television, and Streaming

Productions during the COVID–19 Pandemic', *csatf.org*. 1 June. https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6935424-Task-Force-White-Paper-6-1-20.html. Accessed on 9 November 2020.

Jha, Lata. 2020. 'India's Top Multiplex Players Eye Drive-in Cinemas to Bounce Back to Business', *Livemint*, 23 August. https://www.livemint.com/news/india/india-s-top-multiplex-players-eye-drive-in-cinemas-to-bounce-back-to-business-11598160396980.html. Accessed on 9 November 2020.

Keidl, Philipp Dominik and Laliv Melamed (eds.). 2020. *Pandemic Media*. https://pandemicmedia.meson.press/chapters/contents/. Accessed on 19 November 2020.

Keramalu, Karthik. 2020. 'Review: *Putham Pudhu Kaalai* is a Mixed Sweet-box', *The Quint*, 16 October. https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/movie-reviews/putham-pudhu-kaalai-amazon-prime-video-review#read-more. Accessed on 7 November 2020.

KPMG. 2020. 'A Year off Script: Time for Resilience', KPMG Report, 30 September. Accessed on 12 November 2020.

Lobato, Roman. 2019. *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution*. New York: New York University Press.

Mini, Darshana Sreedhar. Forthcoming. 'Locating the "B" in the B-circuit Cinema', in Vebhuti Duggal, Bindu Menon and Spandan Bhattacharya (eds.), *Film Studies: An Introduction*. Delhi/Kolkata: Worldview Publications.

New Indian Express. 2020. 'Fahadh Faasil Donates Portion of *C U Soon* Profits to FEFKA.' 6 October. https://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/malayalam/2020/oct/06/fahadh-faasil-donates-portion-of-cu-soon-profits-to-fefka-2206198.html. Accessed on 12 November 2020.

Producers Guild of India. 2020. 'Back to Action: Cut to Staying Safe'. https://ifta-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/INDIA-GUILD-S.O.P..pdf. Accessed on 19 November 2020.

Rodowick, D. N. 2007. *The Virtual Life of Film*. US: Harvard University Press.

SAG–AFTRA (Screen Actor Guild–American Federation of Television and Radio Artists). 2020. 'COVID–19 Return to Work Agreement with DGA, IATSE, SAG–AFTRA and Teamsters/Basic Crafts', SAG–AFTRA, 21 September. https://www.sagaftra.org/files/sa_documents/ReturnToWorkAgreement_wAMPTP.pdf. Accessed on 12 November 2020.

Shanmugam, Kavitha. 2020. '*C U Soon* a Big Hit; Mahesh Narayan Ecstatic', *The Federal*, 5 September. https://thefederal.com/entertainment/the-federal-exclusive-c-u-soon-a-big-hit-on-amazon-prime-mahesh-narayanan-ecstatic/. Accessed on 19 November 2020.

Shrijith, Sajin. 2020. '*C U Soon* Took Three Weeks to Shoot but Two Months to Edit, says Fahadh Faasil', *New Indian Express*, 29 August. https://www.newindianexpress.com/entertainment/malayalam/2020/aug/29/interview--cu-soon-took-three-weeks-to-shoot-but-two-months-to-edit-says-fahad-faasil-2189573.html. Accessed on 12 November 2020.

Suri, Rishabh. 2021. '*Master* on OTT 2 Weeks After Theatres: What's the Ideal Gap Between Theatrical and OTT Release?', *Hindustan Times*, 16 February. https://www.hindustantimes.com/entertainment/bollywood/master-on-ott-2-weeks-after-theatres-what-s-the-ideal-gap-between-theatrical-and-ott-release-101613463056279.html. Accessed on 1 April 2021.

Venkiteswaran, C. S. 2020. 'Changing Screens, Scripts that Need to be Changed: New Film Exhibition Venues and the Sustainability of Cinema', *Chalachitra Sameeksa*, June.

Zimmerman, Patricia and Caren Kaplan. 2020. 'Coronavirus Drone Genres: Spectacles of Distance and Melancholia', *Film Quarterly*. 30 April. https://filmquarterly.org/2020/04/30/coronavirus-drone-genres-spectacles-of-distance-and-melancholia/.

◆◆

AMPLIFICATION AS PANDEMIC EFFECT
Single Screens in Telugu Country*

S. V. SRINIVAS

RAGHAV
NANDURI

The pandemic did not introduce any new changes, problems or solutions in theatrical exhibition. The effect of the lockdown, which resulted in the suspension of screenings from 25 March 2020 to early January 2021, was the *amplification* of a transformation in distribution and exhibition that is traceable to the late 1990s.

Our claims are based on a field-based study of theatrical exhibition in Rajahmundry, a provincial city in Andhra Pradesh. We conducted this study in 2019 and followed it up with further conversations with our Rajahmundry collaborators in January 2021 (when theatres were preparing to reopen), interviews with other Telugu film industry representatives and media reports.

The most visible manifestation of the transformation that we track in the following pages is the emergence of a new exhibition model, which arrested the rapid decline of single screens seen in the 1990s and early years of this century. This model is back-ended by an integration that recalls the studio system in some respects. We ask whether the Telugu film industry's integration will extend or be undone by transnational Internet and media giants. In the first part of the essay, we draw on our Rajahmundry fieldwork to provide an account of the new exhibition regime. In the second, we examine developments during the lockdown. In our concluding section, we speculate on implications of the impending obsolescence of the single screen.

BEFORE THE LOCKDOWN

Theatrical exhibition in India underwent a drastic makeover in the last two decades, with the multiplex emerging as the tail that wagged the box office dog. In the southern states, the picture was somewhat different. Despite a significant decline in numbers, single screens remained important for box office collections, contributing up to 60 per cent of revenues.

As suggested in an earlier work (Srinivas, et. al, 2018), among the reasons for the continued relevance of single screens in southern India is the emergence of a new category of exhibitor in the early years of this century. The 21st-century exhibitor does not *own* the neighbourhood theatre. Instead, he leases several and is a member of a syndicate whose members, according to some estimates, account for over 90 per cent of the single-screen seating capacity available in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh.[1] By 2014, there were reportedly 150 such exhibitors.[2] They include four major family-owned groups of companies, viz., the Suresh group (Daggubati Suresh and family), Geetha group (Allu Aravind and family), Sri Venkateswara Creations and sister companies ('Dil' Raju and family) and Asian Cinemas (Sunil Narang and family). These groups were already well established in production and distribution, and went on to lease single screens in the Telugu states by the hundreds. They also work closely with smaller leaseholders located across the Telugu states.

Perhaps unprecedented is the extent to which studios, production, distribution, and exhibition—distinct sectors in the Telugu film industry—came to be integrated in this century. Despite crossholding and complex networks connecting them, these sectors have functioned as distinct interest groups. This integration coincided with the bifurcation of Andhra Pradesh in 2014.

Digitisation was a driver of integration. The digitisation of projection and exhibition promised to reduce distribution costs and waiting time for new releases in theatrical B and C circuits. Digitisation was also promoted as an effective means of countering piracy.[3] The catch, however, was that digitisation required fresh investments—something most cinema-hall owners could ill-afford, especially in downmarket areas.

To better understand the process by which cash-strapped cinema halls came to be integrated into a digitally enabled exhibition sector spread across two states, we spoke to exhibitors and distributors in Rajahmundry, the 7th-most populous city in Andhra Pradesh. The focus of our Rajahmundry study was the town-/city-level node in the exhibition network.

There are 13 single-screen theatres in Rajahmundry. By late 2020, three multiplexes—reportedly costing ₹200 crore—were under construction. Even a cursory glance at Rajahmundry gives us a clear picture of the 21st-century lessee–exhibitor, and the integration of exhibition with production and distribution.

In 2019, single screens in Rajahmundry were thriving. All 13 theatres were renovated and digitised in the past decade, and equipped with Dolby 4K or Atmos sound systems. Ten screens are either owned or leased by distribution chains. Between them, Suresh Movies and Anusri Cinemas control nine screens (four of these are with Anusri). Geetha leases one theatre.

The Suresh group owns production and distribution companies and studios in Hyderabad and Visakhapatnam. The Daggubati family includes two well-known actors, Venkatesh and Rana. Anusri Cinemas is a local player. This company was established by Athi Satyanarayana, a former employee of Suresh Movies, who ran his own distribution company for some years. Lessee–exhibitors, such as Anusri Cinemas, are traceable to the churning in the distribution sector in the 1990s.

By the 1990s, the Telugu film industry's distribution sector witnessed a sharp growth in the number of new entrants known as *buyers*. These buyers could be anyone with the capital to bid for distribution rights. Typically, buyers would bid competitively, and speculatively, for rights in a single-distribution territory, resulting in substantial gains for producers of big-budget star vehicles. The territory could be a single district with a high density of cinema halls, or a cluster of districts. There was a high attrition rate among buyers because films failed frequently at the box office (Srinivas, 2009). Athi Satyanarayana left Suresh Movies to become a buyer. Another important distributor–exhibitor in the city, A. Satyanarayana Murthy, had been a buyer in the past too.

Murthy's film career began when he joined Navayuga Films—a reputed distribution company established in 1947—as a typist. Promoted as an assistant manager in Navayuga, he left the organisation when offered the job of manager of a smaller distribution company. However, his new employer withdrew from distribution after incurring losses. Murthy then started the distribution company Lakshmi Devi Films with two partners and became one of the numerous buyers in the East Godavari district.

Murthy's company too ran into losses and shut down. He then became a manager in Sri Surya Movies, a production–distribution company of Telugu and Tamil films, which had a fabulous run from 1995 to 2005. Surya Movies too incurred losses and closed down its Rajahmundry office. Murthy then began leasing cinema halls in Rajahmundry and towns nearby. At one point, he had leased a dozen cinema halls and renovated them. Of late, he has been withdrawing from exhibition and has stopped renewing leases of theatres. He continues to run a few theatres in smaller towns. His main business now is his restaurant in Rajahmundry.

Like Murthy, Athi Satyanarayana, who now runs Anusri Films (distribution) and Anusri Cinemas (exhibition), had exited distribution (albeit temporarily) to enter exhibition by leasing theatres in and around Rajahmundry. Unlike Murthy, he returned to distribution and continued to expand his exhibition business over the years. As of January 2021, Athi Satyanarayana held the lease for some 30 single screens in and around Rajahmundry.

The late Venkata Seetharama Sastry, with whom we spoke before his demise, was popularly known as Geetha Sastry on account of his long association with Geetha Film Distributors. A key player in the city's distribution scene, he too had been a buyer in

Image 1: Office of Vintage Creations Private Limited, one of Rajahmundry's established distributors

the past. Sastry began as a representative of a distribution company in the 1970s, worked as a manager in several reputed distribution companies in Rajahmundry, and even worked with Geetha in Hyderabad. He then returned to Rajahmundry to become a buyer. The changing fortunes of buyers, and an offer he could not refuse from his former employer, resulted in his return to Geetha to manage its distribution business in the Godavari districts.

The evolution of Anusri Films into a major exhibitor (Anusri Cinemas) in the Rajahmundry area coincides with the digitisation of projection and distribution of films. Significantly, Athi Satyanarayana and Murthy, both from very different backgrounds, rose alongside the 'Big Four' producer–distributor–exhibitors of the Telugu industry.

Buyers, despite their ability to bid competitively for films, were at a clear disadvantage by the early 21st century because of a severe crisis in the exhibition sector: from the late 1990s, hundreds of cinema halls were closing down, and a number of remaining theatres were in a state of disrepair. Theatres also needed to digitise. The two heads of expense were closely linked. Digital projection held the promise of bringing new releases to non-metropolitan screens, but the ability of run-down cinema halls to attract viewers was in question. The survival of theatres depended on investments in projection, sound, improved seating, air-conditioning, and so on. Major producer–distributors stepped in and began leasing theatres across undivided Andhra Pradesh, and invested in repair and renovation. The buyers had to contend with emerging exhibition networks controlled by these producer–distributors with whom they were in competition.

The story of Rajahmundry region's cinema halls is no different from the rest of India. The city, which now has 13 theatres, had 22 in 1995.[4] Naga Devi, one of the oldest cinema halls of the area, was converted into a shopping complex called Chennai Shopping Mall (clothing, accessories, jewellery; image 2). Nataraj (image 3) and Ramakrishna, which somehow managed to survive until a few years ago, were in the process of being converted to function halls. Jayaram turned into a tote centre (where horse racing bets are placed; image 4). Two theatre complexes—the two-screen Parvati–Padmavati (image 5), and three-screen Ganga–Yamuna–Saraswati—were demolished. Both complexes were on the outskirts

Image 2: Naga Devi's reincarnation as a mall

Image 3: Nataraj, soon to be a function hall

Image 4: The Tote Centre that used to be Jayaram

Image 5: The site where Parvati–Padmavati once stood

of Rajahmundry and were apparently unable to attract either lessees or other businesses.

Once the decision is taken to close down a theatre, the possibilities are seemingly endless. One of the cinema halls Murthy leased is in Ravulapalem, a town near Rajahmundry. The theatre had been closed for business and was being used as a shelter for cattle and goats. Murthy was drawn to it because of its location in the heart of town. He leased it, and spent ₹40 lakh in repair and renovation.[5]

In the early years of this century, Suresh Movies and Geetha Film Distributors began to lease theatres in the Rajahmundry area. Athi Satyanarayana entered leasing a few years later (around 2007). As it turned out, he borrowed the playbook of the very distribution companies which were driving buyers like himself out of the distribution business.

As pointed out earlier, the new exhibition model, which transformed hundreds of single screens into multiplex-like islands of airconditioned comfort (see images 6–8), was predicated on the need for investment to repair crumbling structures, projection equipment, plush seating, etc. It was powered by entrepreneurs who had access to funds for the makeover of single screens.

Investments were quite substantial. Murthy spent ₹40 lakh to reconvert the cattle shelter into a cinema hall. Athi Satyanarayana invested about ₹1.5–2 crore in every theatre he leased. We learnt that for centrally located cinema halls in Rajahmundry, renovation costs could be close to ₹3 crore. Athi Satyanarayana's growing importance as an exhibitor resulted in an arrangement with Geetha Film Distributors to release the latter's films locally. This agreement was short-lived, but Athi Satyanarayana tied up with his former employers, Suresh Movies, becoming the most important node of Suresh's distribution–exhibition network in the Rajahmundry area. He continues to work with them and also distributes films independently under the banner of Anusri Films. As a result of the arrangement with Anusri Cinemas, nine of the 13 screens in Rajahmundry are available at any given time for films distributed by Suresh Movies. This integration of production, distribution and exhibition has meant the availability of a steady supply of new releases for theatres in smaller urban centres.

Depending on the location of the theatre, the monthly lease can range from ₹10,000 to ₹2 lakh. Commanding the highest leases

Image 6: Syamala, owned by Suresh Productions, Suresh Movies' parent company

Image 7: The multiplex experience in Syamala

Image 8: Sri Sai Krishna, one of the theatres leased by Anusri Cinemas

Image 9: The Anusri Cinemas Menu in June 2019 (left to right): *Maharishi*, a big-budget Telugu production; *Killer*, dubbed from Tamil; Telugu dubbed version of the Hollywood blockbuster *Men in Black*; a low-budget Telugu original *Vajra Kavachadhara Govinda*. *Maharishi* was released about three weeks earlier and was being screened in a small-town theatre run by Anusri

are, naturally, theatres located in prime areas. Lease agreements could range from one to 15 years. Under what is known as the ground lease agreement, the lessee invests in renovation and also pays for all the running costs of the theatre.

From our interactions with the exhibitors in Rajahmundry, we learnt that the substantial capital invested by lessees *did not come from the film business*. This follows a pattern established in the Telugu film industry from the early days of sound: new investments in the cinema business had their origin in surpluses generated from a variety of activities unrelated to film. For this reason, the industry continued to grow, although individual producers and distributors lost money and exited the business (Srinivas, 2009). Unlike Suresh and Geetha, which ran profitable production and distribution houses, and can thus be presumed to have ploughed their profits into leasing theatres, Athi Satyanarayana had admittedly lost money in distribution. We have no information on how he managed to raise many crore for renovating rundown cinema halls. Off-the-record conversations with a local film industry representative point to the continuities between the buyer era of distribution and the new exhibition regime: investments are

sourced from real estate, commodity trade, liquor, transport, money lending, etc.

By early 2020, the exhibition sector in the Rajahmundry area appeared to be reasonably healthy. The two-decade-old trend of closing cinema halls or converting them into commercial real estate had been paused. The most recent Telugu, Hollywood and other non-Telugu films (dubbed into Telugu) were being released even in small towns surrounding Rajahmundry. Digitisation and the links lessees had with production–distribution companies made this possible (see image 9). Upgraded theatres were more comfortable than cinema halls in the region had ever been in the past. Theatre owners received rents but did not have to worry about rising maintenance costs. And multiplexes were not yet threatening the business of single screens.

Even so, all was not well. Athi Satyanarayana—who was doing very well under the new regime—himself drew attention to a set of worrying developments affecting the future of both single screens and multiplexes. Single screens were particularly vulnerable because multiplexes were expected to lure their customers away even in smaller cities like Rajahmundry. Indeed, this city is expected to double its screen count when its three multiplexes are ready for business.

The multiplex was not the only threat, or even the biggest. The life of a film, Athi Satyanarayana pointed out, had been growing shorter over the years. Piracy, coupled with television and OTT releases, made most films worthless for distributors and exhibitors within weeks of their theatrical release. The gap between theatrical and OTT/television releases had been reduced to three weeks. Distributors were concerned about the possibility of producers striking deals with OTT platforms, further reducing this gap. With digital projection and saturation releases, film was akin to a *perishable commodity*, says Athi Satyanarayana (see image 10). In Rajahmundry, for example, the big-budget Mahesh Babu vehicle *Maharshi* (dir: Vamsi Paidipalli; 2019; image 9) was screened in nine of 13 cinema halls in the opening week. Although the film ran for several weeks (in fewer cinema halls), much of the business was in fact done during the first weekend of its release. With smaller towns around Rajahmundry screening the film simultaneously, there was little chance of B and C circuit theatres showing the film after its initial run. Digital distribution and projection also meant there was *no physical print* which could be made available for a short second run in the odd theatre. For the most part, screens too would be unavailable for re-runs because new films, including those dubbed from other languages, were awaiting release.

There were other problems, which our lessee–exhibitor collaborators did not touch on. Theatre owners, who had signed

Image 10: Posters celebrating the 10-day run (two weekends) of *Falaknuma Das* (2019), a remake of the Malayalam film *Angamaly Diaries*

long-term lease agreements, felt cheated as exhibition boomed under the new regime. As property prices rose in smaller cities, there were redevelopment opportunities, which too were missed on account of long-term leases.

The new exhibitor had thus arrested the collapse of the single-screen sector. But the sector had in fact stagnated. No new single-screen theatres were being built. Revenues grew largely on account of the increase in ticket prices, not customers. Theatre owners who rented out their premises were no longer part of the film industry.

LOCKDOWN AS AMPLIFICATION

All through the lockdown, single screens ran up electricity bills of about ₹1.4 lakh each, 'even without screening films'.[6] In January 2021, Athi Satyanarayana saw little hope for the exhibition business in the near future. He noted with resignation, 'It is inevitable that the single-screen culture will die.' Even in his 2019 interviews, he had spoken of the impending obsolescence of single screens. How exactly did the lockdown hasten that process?

Throughout the lockdown, the most immediate cause for concern was the suspension of monthly lease payments to theatre owners. Our collaborators in Rajahmundry confirmed this. Theatre owners struggled to pay regular maintenance bills. Staff were either paid part salaries or given monthly rations. As of January 2021, when most theatres in Andhra Pradesh reopened, theatre owners and lease holders in Rajahmundry had not resolved the difficult problem of rent backlog for the lockdown period. None of Rajahmundry's cinema halls closed permanently in 2021, but other cities in the Telugu states reported closures. Hyderabad is likely to lose several of its iconic theatres as a direct consequence of the lockdown.[7] Industry insiders estimate that between 1,500 and 2,000 single screens across the country might close down permanently as a result of the lockdown.[8] Half of these screens, maintains one observer, will be in the five southern states.[9]

Athi Satyanarayana, who had won an industry award for distribution in 2017, quit distribution. He shifted his focus to real estate and was planning to give up exhibition in the years to come. Most other exhibitors too, he said, were thinking of quitting.

In 2020, even as theatrical exhibition remained suspended, and the single-screen segment stared at yet another phase of rapid

contraction, OTT platform subscription grew by 30 per cent nationally (from 22.2 million to 29 million) between March and July 2020.[10] The average viewing time of subscribers increased from 20 minutes to 50–60 minutes per day. The number of platforms grew from two in 2012, to 40 in November 2020.[11] The National Association of Software and Service Companies (NASSCOM) attributes the sharp increase in subscriptions and viewing to the availability of inexpensive mobile Internet, and the lockdown. The growth in the *number of platforms* cannot be directly attributed to the lockdown. As producer–director Ram Gopal Varma put it in an interview, 'OTT [platforms] would have taken 2–3 years more to have the kind of impact that we are seeing currently [in June 2020], but it would have come for sure… COVID–19 only sped it up.'[12]

The growth of OTT platforms implies the reduced importance of theatrical exhibition, and the increasing influence of such giant corporations as Disney and Amazon at the all-India level. Thus, the lockdown might appear to have weakened family-owned companies which controlled theatrical exhibition, production and distribution in the Telugu film industry.

However, the biggest players in the Telugu industry were thinking beyond their single-screen empires before the lockdown. They had invested in multiplexes in the past decade—but they did not stop with multiplexes. Even as Netflix and Prime Video entered film production, the Telugu industry's leaders were preparing to launch OTT platforms.

The proof of concept for 'regional' OTT platforms, specialising in content in Indian languages other than Hindi, was available since 2017, when Sun NXT (for the four south Indian languages) and Hoichoi (for Bengali language content) were launched by media companies with businesses that included film production, distribution, exhibition, and television content/channels in regional languages. The official launch of Aha, the Telugu OTT platform, on 25 March 2020, coincided with the nation-wide lockdown (the platform had begun streaming on 25 January). Aha is jointly owned by Geetha Arts and Hyderabad-based My Home Group with core businesses of real estate, power and cement. Significantly, two very different kinds of infrastructure companies are partners in this venture.

In early 2020, before the lockdown, the media reported that Suresh and Sri Venkateswara groups were to launch an OTT platform.[13] If these plans materialise, OTT technology will result in the further consolidation of the centralising tendencies witnessed in the industry over the last two decades.

The diversification of major industry figures into streaming services was not a direct consequence of the lockdown. Nevertheless, it is a logical next step for the integration of the industry to be extended to streaming video.

While platforms of various kinds emerged as default infrastructure for film exhibition during the lockdown, it is unlikely that they will render the single screen redundant in the immediate future. Important for our purposes is the acceleration of their obsolescence and possible consequences thereof. The lockdown also drew our attention to the competition for *infrastructure* which, too, threatens single-screen exhibition.

Less than two weeks into the nation-wide lockdown, a media report predicted that OTT platforms would 'take over cinema due to lockdown'.[14] This prediction proved to be partly correct, but in a bizarrely literal manner: the year 2020 ended with reports from Tamil Nadu and the Telugu states that Amazon was taking over cinema halls to convert them into warehouses.[15] This development was welcomed by some industry observers who held that Amazon's decision would benefit theatre owners with no source of income as a result of the suspension of screenings. As pointed out previously, monthly lease payments were suspended in Rajahmundry during the lockdown. However, Tirupur Subramaniyam, who heads the Tamil Nadu Theatre Owners Association, interpreted Amazon's move as nothing short of a conspiracy to destroy single screens. He claimed that Amazon was taking advantage of the lockdown and offering double the normal rent to use cinema halls as warehouses. As it is, Subramaniyam reportedly stated, Amazon's Prime Video was a major threat to theatrical exhibition.[16]

By September, Amazon had set up 1,000 warehouses in urban neighbourhoods in India.[17] In December, Amazon reported a '64 per cent increase in monthly order volumes in 2020'.[18] It is not clear just how many of these warehouses were cinema halls before the lockdown. Yet, the threat is real enough, and not merely because Amazon offers an alternative to theatrical viewing: the ground rent

for cinema halls is not attractive enough for the real estate to remain with the film industry.

Will the post-lockdown challenge be any different from earlier challenges to the film industry from retailers who took over cinema halls in the past? Our tentative, and speculative, answer is in the affirmative. The competition faced by the film industry for urban land (where cinema halls stand) from emerging businesses will be far more severe. Competitors now include e-commerce, logistics and supply-chain companies, which are expected 'to make a bulk of the demand' for commercial real estate in the near future.[19] Amazon's takeover of cinema halls during the lockdown is an instance of precisely this kind of demand for real estate. We should not forget that single screens stand on some of the largest plots of land in densely built urban centres.

Furthermore, in the 21st-century exhibition model, the theatre owner (as distinct from the lessee) is essentially a rent-seeker, presumed to be insulated from the risks of film exhibition. He also has nothing to gain from a film's successful run. The suspension of lease payments in the lockdown was a warning that the lessee–exhibitor model is anything but risk-free. This crisis is turning out to be an opportunity for some cinema-hall owners to terminate long-term leases and find better paying tenants.

The persistence of the single screen and its continued relevance up to 2020 have been among the most visible signs of a complex historical legacy that Indian film industries have struggled to discard. The access to screens was, and remains, the biggest challenge to filmmakers: it is easier to find a willing producer than to release a film theatrically. Most Telugu filmmakers, like their counterparts in the rest of India, fail to recover production costs. The industry grew from strength to strength by attracting surpluses generated elsewhere into production and distribution. The new exhibition regime facilitated the flow of fresh and much-needed investment into exhibition. This exhibition model, but also the industry model predicated on speculative retail investment, might now be on the verge of obsolescence. The news of the 'takeover' of cinema halls by Amazon coincided with unverifiable reports of Disney leasing a part of Ramoji Film City (RFC), Hyderabad, India's largest production facility, for a period of three years.[20] Even if only a part of the facility has been rented by Disney, the writing on the wall is clear: local players—in this instance, large and small domestic film and television producers from across the country, who have been RFC's customers—are unable to sustain the industry's production infrastructure.

The pandemic thus amplified the power of transnational entertainment majors. But these did not gobble up the domestic film industry's leading players. On the contrary, the latter remain key to the next phase of cinema's evolution on small screens.

AFTER THE SINGLE SCREEN

The 'single-screen culture', the death of which Athi Satyanarayana feels is imminent, is an economic and socio-political legacy that includes, among other things, fan celebrations in and around theatres, the production of formulaic vehicles of megastars that are assembled to elicit 'active viewing', and, more recently, the concentration of infrastructure (near-total control of production facilities, distribution networks and exhibition) in a small number of family-owned entities. Historically, the cinema hall has been a site of social mixing, and, therefore, a site for a public to be constituted. Paradoxically, the single-screen sector is also symptomatic of the power and influence of the Telugu industry's elite. The cinema hall today is a signifier of immobility and status quo.

It is entirely possible that the influence of the film industry's elite will remain undiminished even if the single-screen era ends. The model of integration has extended to the multiplex and OTT platform in the recent past. As of now, the arrival of Indian giants (Zee, Reliance) and transnational ones (Disney–Hotstar, Prime Video, Netflix) does not appear to have had a perceptible impact on the industry's leadership. On the contrary, new talent and content continue to be mediated by the same set of players controlling single-screen exhibition. Take the biggest success of 'independent' filmmaking in Telugu cinema, the low-budget runaway hit *C/o Kancharapalem* (dir: Venkatesh Maha; 2018). Produced by an outsider to the industry (an NRI medical professional), the film cast non-actors and was made on location in and around Visakhapatnam. Had it not been for a stroke of serendipity, this film could well have had a limited theatrical run and ended up on YouTube, like countless others. Luckily, Daggubati Suresh was invited by the producer to the film's preview, which was being held at the Daggubati family's preview theatre. He was so impressed with the audience's response

during the preview that he announced Suresh Movies' decision to distribute *Kancharapalem* at the end of the preview. Just like that. That is how the film was picked up for theatrical exhibition and came to be screened in over 150 cinemas across Andhra and Telangana, and in more than a hundred screens in the United States.[21]

In our conversations with a prominent Telugu director (not Venkatesh Maha), we learnt that OTT platforms, including homegrown ones like Aha, have been scouting for creative talent to make films that can be released theatrically as well as on their platforms. Venkatesh Maha pointed out that content aggregators who procure films for OTT platforms have been around for some years and, at least in principle, offer an alternative to theatrical distribution and exhibition. After the success of *C/o Kancharapalem*, the festival circuit too might help low-budget off-beat films find viewers, including on OTT platforms. The shrinking single-screen sector and the emerging category of the 'OTT film'—which a film commentator described as a film 'to enjoy with your family' and is quite unlike regular OTT content 'which is either unnecessarily erotic, snootily pretentious, and downright stupid'[22]—could result in a decisive shift in the kind of films that are made, and how they are made and distributed. And the single screen can die a quiet death, engendering thousands of godowns, malls, multiplexes and whatnots in its wake. Surely, the handful of families that currently sit on the industry's apex will migrate to other screens and technologies. Meanwhile, the cinema hall's public too is leaking onto social media platforms where fans have begun to perform their excesses, while other viewers point out movie mistakes and provide star ratings.

As stated earlier, the pandemic did not make anything new happen. It merely amplified the obsolescence of the single screen as exhibition infrastructure, accelerated the concentration of industrial infrastructure in the hands of a relatively small set of actors, and promises to place the promotion of 'off-beat' cinema on the agenda of the Telugu industry's leaders.

◆

NOTES

1. A similar model exists in Kerala, but on a smaller scale. According to a recent media report, over half the single screens in Bangalore city were leased out on a monthly rental basis. It is not clear if these lease holders are producer–distributors. See https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/all-theatres-unlikely-open-bengaluru-single-screen-owners-face-myriad-problems-134438. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

2. See https://www.deccanchronicle.com/141025/entertainment-tollywood/article/lease-system-legal-exhibitors. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

3. See, for instance, this claim by the CEO of a satellite services provider in 2005: https://www.financialexpress.com/archive/it-will-reduce-film-piracy/159338/. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

4. Based on theatres listed in *Andhra Pradesh Film Diary 1995*.

5. Haubitz and Zoche (2016) document the conversion of cinema halls in south Indian states into showrooms and other kinds of rental real estate. They also draw attention to the south India-wide renovation and revival of decrepit and/or closed cinema halls.

6. Reported in *The Hindu*. See https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/theatres-gear-up-to-reopen-after-months-of-shutdown/article32748459.ece. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

7. See https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/telugu/movies/news/5-single-screen-theatres-set-to-permanently-shut-down-in-hyderabad/articleshow/79431814.cms and https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/5-single-screen-theatres-shut-hyderabad-others-stare-bleak-future-138859. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

8. See https://www.businesstoday.in/current/corporate/coronavirus-fallout-1500-2000-movie-screens-may-shut-shop-in-india-as-content-lines-go-dry/story/423329.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

9. See https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/entertainment/covid-19-impact-theatres-turn-into-amazon-godowns-2020-to-see-steepest-fall-in-screen-count-6263011.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

10. See https://www.ibef.org/blogs/india-s-ott-market-witnessing-a-rise-in-number-of-paid-subscribers. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

11. See https://community.nasscom.in/communities/digital-transformation/telecom-media-communities/future-of-ott-in-india.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

12. See https://theprint.in/india/special-effects-social-distancing-how-ram-gopal-varma-shot-indias-first-covid-film/440522/. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

13. See https://www.thehansindia.com/cinema/tollywood/suresh-babu-dil-raju-to-launch-ott-platform-609607. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

14. See https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/digital-india/ott-platforms-to-take-over-cinema-due-to-lockdown/74979023. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

15. See https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/trends/entertainment/covid-19-impact-theatres-turn-into-amazon-godowns-2020-to-see-steepest-fall-in-screen-count-6263011.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

16. See https://www.indiaglitz.com/amazon-plan-to-convert-movie-theaters-into-godowns-tirupur-subramaniyam--news-276322. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

17. See https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-09-16/amazon-plans-to-put-1-000-warehouses-in-neighborhoods. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

18. See https://www.businesstoday.in/current/corporate/amazon-adds-15-lakh-indian-sellers-in-2020-4152-cross-rs-1-crore-in-sales/story/425518.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

19. See the highlights of the report published in late February 2021 at https://www.colliers.com/en-in/research/india-market-outlook-2021-colliers. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

20. While some film websites, blogs and *Republic World* reported the news, none of the Hyderabad newspapers mentioned this development. Our industry sources were unable to verify these reports. See https://www.bollywoodhungama.com/news/bollywood/hotstar-disney-rents-ramoji-film-city-3-years/ and https://www.republicworld.com/entertainment-news/web-series/hotstar-disney-ramoji-film-city-what-to-watch-on-hotstar-disney-2020-m.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

21. Telephonic interview with Venkatesh Maha, 28 June 2021. For an earlier interview of the director on the distribution of the film, see https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/tollywood/060418/no-small-act-this.html. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

22. See https://www.voxspace.in/2020/07/30/review-of-uma-maheswara-ugra-roopasya/. Accessed on 1 March 2021.

REFERENCES

Andhra Pradesh Film Diary 1995. 1995. Hyderabad: Andhra Pradesh Film Chamber of Commerce.

Haubitz, S. and S. Zoche. 2016. *Hybrid Modernism: Movie Theatres in South India*. Frankfurt: Spector Books.

Srinivas, S. V., V. H. C. V. Megha Shyam, Raghav Nanduri, Vasundhara Singhal and Vishnu Dath R. 2018. 'From Single Screen to YouTube: Tracking the Regional Blockbuster', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 9 (2): 233–50. DOI:10.1177/0974927619841205.

Srinivas, S. V. 2009. *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after NT Rama Rao*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

❖❖

THE #METOO MOVEMENT IN THE INDIAN FILM INDUSTRIES
Bringing Sexual Exploitation into Focus

UMA MAHESWARI BHRUGUBANDA

It took nearly a century for the discourse about Indian film industries to move from respectability and morality to one that recognises sexual and economic exploitation of women. The early decades of Indian cinema from roughly the 1910s to the 1940s were dominated by discussions of the 'disreputable' women who peopled it. Many women from such traditional performing castes and communities as the devadasis, *kalavantulu*, *tawaif* and *baiji* found new avenues for employment in the field of cinema (Majumdar, 2010, 2015; Mukherjee, 2015). The dominant discourse of the time was that their social background rendered these women innately immoral, and their very presence tainted the entire field of cinema. In order to gain respectability, therefore, there were numerous calls to 'cultured ladies' to enter this new field and redeem its reputation. There are now well-known accounts, both in the popular realm and in academic scholarship, of these discussions about respectability. From the 1940s onwards, many actresses from 'respectable' families did enter the film industry and had flourishing careers. Despite this, the fascination for female film stars on-screen was combined with the stigmatisation of, and prejudice against, these very same women off-screen. Ironically, dominant notions of female chastity continued to be manufactured and circulated via the cinema itself, while women working in the field struggled to keep up a desirable image on the film screen and a respectable image outside the cinema, in society. The onus and the burden of good character and moral virtue was on the women. The men working in the cinema, their behaviour and attitudes, the nature of the work and the workplace, and the conditions of employment remained mostly out of focus through the

20th century. Therefore, we can argue that even though none of the accusations made against prominent film people has been proved, and there have been no actual convictions, the #MeToo moment/movement has definitely altered the terms of the discourse and brought into public discussion the question of sexual exploitation of women in the film industry.

A NEW FRAMEWORK AND A NEW VOCABULARY

Of course, nothing happens overnight. There have been both individual and collective struggles against exploitative working conditions and unfair wages in the film industry. Unions and associations to protect the interests of different levels of workers too have been formed over time and function more or less effectively. However, none of them has ever articulated the pervasive sexual harassment and almost naturalised sexual exploitation of women in the field. Furthermore, it has been effectively demonstrated that sexual and economic exploitation are so deeply intertwined, especially for women in the bottom rungs of the industry, that they cannot be separated either in delineating the problem or in working-out solutions. That is indeed a major breakthrough achieved by the #MeToo movement.

Stories and anecdotes long circulating as 'rumours', or framed as 'affairs', or those seen as part of the 'general, accepted promiscuity' prevalent in the industry, are now being renamed and reframed by women speaking out as coercive and predatory sexual exploitation. The old vocabulary of female virtue and chastity has been discarded and replaced with a new vocabulary of pervasive and normalised sexual harassment, even rape. At least in some of the film industries in India, simultaneous attention is being drawn to issues such as unequal pay and hostile working conditions, and the need for police and legal interventions, if necessary, to revamp the industry. This shift in language and perspective was most dramatically evident in the outrage sparked by the comments made by veteran choreographer, Saroj Khan. Khan remarked that the film industry ought not to be singled out as the site for sexual exploitation. She said that exploitation happened everywhere, even in politics. Ministers, too, have been known to be harassers. She declared that the industry was *mai-baap* (mother and father/family). 'Film industry roti *tho deta hai*…rape *karke chod tho nahin deta*' (The film

industry doesn't abandon you after rape; it will at least feed you). She also added that young girls and women need to be strong: 'If you have the art, you do not need to succumb to demands of sexual favours' (Sharma, 2018). Many found the presumption that women wanting to earn a living in the industry would have to necessarily deal with the precondition of rape completely unacceptable. To put it differently, Khan's implication that women subjected to rape ought to be grateful for being given work and pay was dismissed as a specious argument. Others objected to her placing the burden on women, because she seemed to think that the choice to refuse was a simple, straightforward one available to them. There were also those who objected to Khan's remarks because they besmirched the image of the film industry and the women working in it. This last objection, it is clear, is from those who are not willing to accept the fact of sexual harassment in the industry and can, therefore, be set aside right away. Many prime-time television debates simplistically presented Saroj Khan as defending sexual exploitation in the industry and opposing the #MeToo movement. They made her the straw woman against whom their righteous and 'more-progressive-than-thou' indignation could be directed.

I believe that Saroj Khan's remarks are best understood as a symptom of the wider problem wherein sexual exploitation is seen as a normal practice in the industry. 'The casting couch has been around for ages. That has been the norm. Why make a fuss about it?' seemed to be her pragmatic response. Paired with this pragmatism was the paradoxical assertion that women ought to refuse unwanted advances if they were truly talented. The #MeToo movement is attempting to disrupt this old 'common sense'.

BACKGROUND

In the wake of the #MeToo movement in Hollywood and the academic field in India, #MeToo protests began in Indian film industries as well. Many online media channels suggest that it is Tanushree Dutta's November 2018 revelation that sparked off the movement in India. Dutta recounted the sexual harassment and violent intimidation that she was subjected to by well-known actor Nana Patekar and his political supporters many years ago on a film set. Videos of that incident surfaced and were circulated widely in social media. However, we can locate the beginnings of this

movement a year earlier in November 2017 in Kerala. The protest against the sexual molestation of an actress, and the subsequent formation of the Women in Cinema Collective by a group of prominent female actors and technicians was an extremely important step, a historic moment. The Collective raised many questions about gender inequality in the film industry.[1]

Nevertheless, it was in 2018 that a series of accusations and revelations of sexual harassment in the different film industries were made. All of these received significant media coverage, and generated much discussion and debate in the public domain. The accusations of harassment and molestation against the well-known director of *Queen*, Vikas Bahl, and the subsequent closure of Phantom Films, a company of which Bahl was a part; the allegations of rape against veteran Hindi actor, Alok Nath; the singer and voice actress Chinmayi Sripada's accusations of harassment against the Tamil lyricist, Vairumuthu; and actor and president of Tamil Nadu Dubbing Union Radha Ravi's distasteful and misogynistic comments about the star Nayantara are all widely known in the media.

However, the consequences of these revelations were far from encouraging. Vikas Bahl was cleared of all charges by an internal inquiry in Reliance Entertainment in June 2019 and went on to direct the film, *Super 30*.[2] Around the same time, Nana Patekar was also given a clean chit by the Mumbai police. Tanushree Dutta argues Patekar bought the clean chit with the power he commands in the industry and society.[3] She also stated elsewhere that her career had ended because of the incident and that she continues her struggle to build an alternative career while Patekar's film career continues to flourish. Chinmayi talked about not getting much work after speaking out against Vairumuthu.[4] Without going into the merits or demerits of each case, it is quite clear that it is not an easy road for women who decide to speak out.

#METOO IN THE TELUGU FILM INDUSTRY: WOMEN AT THE BOTTOM OF THE PYRAMID SPEAK OUT

This section aims to shift focus from the stories of well-known faces and names in Kerala or Bombay to the Telugu film industry, where the movement has come from 'the bottom of the pyramid', as activists working on this issue have rightly pointed out (A. Suneetha, et al., 2018). On 7 April 2018, aspiring actress Sri Reddy staged a semi-nude protest before the Movie Artists Association (MAA) in Hyderabad, condemning the pervasive culture of being propositioned which a woman has to battle and negotiate when she tries to get work in the film industry. Sri Reddy brought into the public domain a matter that was widely known but seldom acknowledged as a problem to be addressed. In the several interviews that she gave to various Telugu television channels,[5] both before and after her sensational protest, Sri Reddy made four related points: first, that every woman who sought work had to deal with demands for sexual favours; second, that there were no mechanisms within the industry for voicing grievances; third, Telugu actors were not preferred for the roles of heroines because they were not considered glamourous enough, and; fourth, that women did not dare to speak out, fearing humiliation and recrimination besides being denied any work in the industry. This vicious circle made it impossible for women to raise the issue of sexual and economic exploitation. The initial response of MAA was to condemn Sri Reddy's protest and to impose a ban upon her. However, the actress' protests received widespread support from women's groups, from the media which reported the incident widely and initiated a debate on the issues raised by her, and from the wider public. A few days later, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) took *suo moto* cognisance of a report of Sri Reddy's protest and issued notices to the Chief Secretary of Telangana and to the Secretary of the Union Minister of Information and Broadcasting, seeking a report on the existing mechanisms in the film industry for the grievance redressal of women artists. Following this move by the NHRC, MAA quickly lifted the ban on Sri Reddy and announced that it would constitute an Internal Complaints Committee. However, rather than the woefully inadequate response from MAA, which moved from a complete denial of the problem and victim blaming to cursory face-saving measures, the remarkable outcome of Sri Reddy's protest was that it opened the floodgates of grievances by women who were leading a precarious existence on the bottom rungs of the industry.

As the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) filed by the women activists of Hyderabad[6] states:

Scores of women artists from the lower rungs of the film industry known variously as junior artists, dialogue artists, company artists

and character artists started pouring out their woes about the hazards of working in the Telugu film industry. One of the biggest hazards, the women artists said, was the quid pro quo nature of work in the film industry where the women could secure a role in a film only if she consented to sexual favours.[7]

In the months of April, May and June 2018, feminist activists collected a number of statements from women who were willing to share their experiences. While sexual exploitation was rampant from top to bottom in the industry, the ones who risked being vocal about this were the ones who were most vulnerable—dialogue artists, and company and junior artists. Very few female stars, or those enjoying relative positions of power in the industry, spoke up in support of these women, making this initiative of the most powerless women even more admirable.

NATURE OF THE WORK AND THE WORKPLACE

One significant point that emerged from these conversations and discussions was about the nature of the workplace.[8] Work in the industry is spread over many spaces: it could be the office of the production house, the producer or the director. Auditions might take place in any of these locations or even in hotel rooms that are booked for this purpose. Once selected for a role, the artist is expected to participate in the shootings conducted on studio sets or on-location shootings which could range from houses, city-streets, airports, or even locations outside the city or country. Moreover, there are no fixed timings in the industry—any time of day or night could be fixed for different kinds of work. This flexibility in terms of space and time renders many women vulnerable to harassment and exploitation. They are often in the midst of a number of men— many, strangers—who could not be called upon to defend them, or even care for them. While the main actors in a film, especially the hero and the heroine, are assured of reasonably good facilities such as changing rooms, make-up rooms and toilets in studios, and caravans consisting of all these facilities for on-location shoots, the junior artists and others are seldom assured of any of these facilities. A majority of women bemoaned the lack of clean toilets, changing rooms, or proper transport to shooting spots, even when work was scheduled for odd hours. They argued that this made them

dependent on some male members of the film unit, who might then take advantage of this dependence. The fluid nature of the workplace and flexible timings make it harder to enforce codes of conduct.

MIDDLE MEN

A second concern that emerged in the stories of the Telugu film industry was the increasing number of middle men. A number of agents, managers and coordinators usually promise work in return for sexual services, but often do not deliver on their promises because it is not clear what standing they have in the industry. This confusion—and lack of transparent, clearly marked structures— makes navigating the industry a literal nightmare, and increases the scope for exploitation. The growing number of acting schools are seen by aspiring actors as a possible point of entry, but they also become sites of false promises and harassment. The shocking extent of this harassment was poignantly narrated by many women in a press conference held soon after Sri Reddy's protest. It spanned the entire spectrum: being ogled at the workplace, 'accidental' brushing and groping, persistent phone calls and lewd messages, and being propositioned and coerced into sex under the threat of loss of work and pay.

BASIC DEMANDS

After detailed consultations with the aggrieved women, the activists put together a list of demands which they submitted to the Chairperson of the Telangana Film Development Corporation in June 2018.[9]

- The regulation of dance/acting schools that were an entry point for aspiring women artists;
- to develop criteria for the issuing of identity cards and online portals for the registration of artists;
- to identify managers for each film production;
- to provide workplace facilities such as bathrooms, drinking water, changing rooms;
- to provide transportation for artists working at odd hours;
- the payment of fees in bank accounts as opposed to cash payments;

- to maintain a help line for women in distress;
- to institute a Grievance Redressal Cell at the office of the Chairperson, Telangana State Film Development Corporation;
- the formation of a Committee Against Sexual Harrassment (CASH) for hearing complaints of sexual harassment.

Nearly a year after the PIL filed in the Telangana High Court, a High-level Committee was appointed by the Telangana state government in April 2019 to understand and investigate the issues of sexual harassment in the Telugu film industry.[10] This Committee has been working with several women activists and representatives from the Telugu film industry. While the report of this Committee is awaited, one thing is certain—a step towards addressing these issues has been taken.

INDUSTRY PATRIARCHS, FILM FAMILIES, FANS AND THE #METOO MOVEMENT

Despite the optimistic tone of the initial sections of this essay, we ought to recognise that the movement is no longer an active, visible struggle today. Various initiatives seeking to bring about structural change are yet to show any concrete results. Moreover, in each instance of protest and struggle, the reactions and intervention of patriarchs within each of the different film industries, and the activism of their fans and political supporters, have revealed the structures that sustain the culture of harassment and exploitation.

Speaking at a round table discussion at the International Film Festival of Kerala held in December 2017, the actress Parvathy commented on the prevailing misogyny in popular Malayalam cinema and, without naming names, expressed regret at how even established male stars did not hesitate to mouth extremely sexist dialogues. She implied that with all the power and popularity that these stars enjoyed, they could very easily refuse to act in such films and use their power to change the more objectionable misogynistic parts. It was obvious to most people in the audience that she was referring to the Mammootty starrer, *Kasaba*. Following this, the actress was viciously trolled online by Mammootty's fans and by others in the Malayalam film industry. Along with the February 2017 kidnap and assault of a Malayalam film actress, this incident is often cited by the

members of the Women in Cinema Collective as an instance of the patriarchal and misogynistic character of the industry.[11]

In the incident involving Nana Patekar and Tanushree Dutta, too, the crowds that gathered in his support were not just his fans but also members of the local political party, the Maharashtra Navanirman Sena. As Dutta has reported in several interviews, and in her complaints to the Cine and TV Artistes' Association (CINTAA) as well as the police, these men gathered around her car and indulged in violent intimidation.

Along with the issue of sexual harassment, Sri Reddy consistently raised the issue of local Telugu girls being sidelined when the selection for female lead roles was made in Telugu films. She said that while top Telugu heroes were given many chances to groom themselves, both in looks and acting skills, girls like her never got a chance to prove their mettle. The unstated but well-recognised truth here was that many of the reigning male stars in Telugu cinema come from established film families and inherit enormous amounts of economic, social and cultural capital. They also enjoy the support of a huge fan base which, in recent times, is cultivated around various extended families, rather than being centred around a single successful star. Hence, there are fan associations devoted to the mega family. Chiranjeevi, who was hailed as a 'megastar', attracted many fans during his long career. Gradually, his fan base was extended to include his brother Pawan Kalyan, who became a major star in his own right. Today, the mega family includes actors Allu Arjun, Chiranjeevi's nephew; Ram Charan, Chiranjeevi's son; as well as Varun Tej, Sai Dharam Tej and Vaishno Tej, all part of the extended family. Fans are encouraged to extend their loyalty and devotion to each new actor from the family. Nagarjuna's family includes his sons Naga Chaitanya and Akhil. Other powerful players in the Telegu film industry are Mahesh Babu's family; and the late NTR's family, including his son, Balakrishna, and grandson, NTR Junior. The power enjoyed by these families does not come solely from being actors, but from the fact that they also own studios and other production facilities; they are actively involved in film production and distribution, and also own theatres in different parts of the two Telugu states. This ensures that they wield immense power in the industry.

Since the 1980s, there has been an active involvement of film stars in politics as well, starting with NTR, followed by

Chiranjeevi[12] and, more recently, Pawan Kalyan. Kalyan is currently the leader of the Jana Sena party that has been playing a very visible and controversial role in Andhra Pradesh politics. The combined strength of the film and political worlds, which is concentrated in the hands of a few families, continues to shape contemporary social and political possibilities in the Telugu states. Needless to add, it consolidates the masculinist and patriarchal nature of the film industry. Therefore, when the #MeToo protests were gaining momentum and widespread support, some remarks made by Sri Reddy against Pawan Kalyan, which were admittedly abusive and ill-advised, made her the target of this massive fan base, and she was subjected to malicious online trolling as well as physical threats and intimidation. She was forced to apologise to Pawan Kalyan, his mother and his fans, and to withdraw her comments. This incident, besides the notoriety she gained for the frank discussion of sexual harassment she and other women face in the industry, has earned her dubious fame and succeeded in discrediting her, despite a grudging acknowledgement of the legitimacy of her demands.[13]

In naming and shaming men who harassed, propositioned, even raped; in pointing to a host of structural and material conditions in the industry that work against the interests of women; by complicating the ideas of 'choice' and 'consent' in those conditions; and by asserting the rights of female artists and other workers, the #MeToo movement is slowly but surely moving towards a new language and a new common sense. It is imagining and pushing for a reorientation of on-screen portrayals of women, for a reorganisation of attitudes and behaviours of people working in the various film industries, as well as of structures and working conditions for all personnel. As Bina Paul Venugopal remarked in her keynote lecture at a conference on the #MeToo Moment,[14] what is needed is not simply putting in place a retributive and punitive response towards the problem of sexual harassment, but efforts towards building an atmosphere in the film industry where women can work without fear. But, as we have seen, the entrenched masculinist, patriarchal character of some Indian film industries, further strengthened by the close links between the film and political worlds, makes this an uphill task to say the very least.

◆

NOTES

1. See Pillai (2017) for a detailed discussion of the Malayalam film industry and the context in which the Women in Cinema Collective came to be formed.

2. 'Vikas Bahl Gets Clean Chit in Sexual Harassment Case', *The Indian Express,* 1 June 2019. https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/vikas-bahl-gets-clean-chit-in-sexual-harassment-case-5759683/. Accessed on 12 February 2021.

3. https://www.indiatoday.in/movies/celebrities/story/-tanushree-dutta-nana-patekar-bought-himself-clean-chit-to-continue-bullying-hapless-young-women-1548127-2019-06-13. Accessed on 12 February 2021.

4. Talk given at the National Conference on the '#MeToo Moment in Our Film Industries', organised by Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad, 29–30 March 2019.

5. TV9 and Mahaa News were two channels that prominently covered her protest and the issues raised subsequently. A simple Google search will pull up several videos of her interviews between March and June 2018. For a sample interview, see Report on TV9 'Actress Sri Reddy's Sensational Comments on Casting Couch—Tollywood TV9', 13 March 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfdLDruzBGI. Accessed on 12 February 2021.

6. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed by seven prominent women's rights activists in Hyderabad on 11 September 2018. They were V. Sandhya of the Progressive Organization of Women, K. Sajaya, Kondaveeti Satyavathi, Devi, M. Sumitra, A. Suneetha and Tejaswini Madabhushi. These petitioners marked the following as respondents in their PIL—the Principal Secretaries of both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana states, Telangana State Film Development, Telugu Film Chamber of Commerce, Telangana State Commission for Women, Director General of Police and Labour Commissioner, Hyderabad. They demanded that a High-level Committee be constituted immediately to go into the numerous complaints of sexual exploitation made by the women in the Telugu film industry. I am grateful to Advocate Vasudha Nagaraj for sharing a copy of this PIL with me.

7. Item no. 6.3 in the PIL mentioned earlier.

8. See PIL mentioned earlier for details.

9. Details given in Item no. 6.7 in the PIL, dated 11 September 2018, mentioned earlier.

10. 'Telangana Government to form Panel to Check Sexual Harassment in Film, TV Industry', *The New Indian Express*, 18 April 2019. https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/telangana/2019/apr/18/panel-to-check-sexual-harassment-in-film-tv-industry-in-1965627.html. Accessed on 12 February 2021.

11. http://theladiesfinger.com/parvathy-interview-mammooty-kasaba-feminichi/. Accessed on 14 January 2021.

12. For detailed analyses of these developments, see S.V. Srinivas (2013, 2009).

13. See this long TV discussion of the issue, and the media trial Sri Reddy was subjected to, in this Mahaa News link, Mahaa News #PrimeTimeWithMurthy, 'Special Discussion Pawan Kalyan vs. Sri Reddy', 18 April 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_YzHBfWYPHc. Accessed on 10 February 2021.

14. Talk given at the National Conference on the '#MeToo Moment in our Film Industries', organised by the Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies in Hyderabad, 29–30 March 2019.

REFERENCES

Majumdar, Neepa. 2015. 'Gossip, Labor, and Female Stardom in Pre-Independence Indian Cinema: The Case of Shanta Apte', in Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (eds.), *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 181–92.

———. 2010. *Wanted Cultured Ladies Only: Female Stardom and Cinema in India, 1930s–1950s*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Mukherjee, Debashree. 2015. 'Scandalous Evidence: Looking for the Bombay Film Actress in an Absent Archive (1930s–1940s)', in Christine Gledhill and Julia Knight (eds.), *Doing Women's Film History: Reframing Cinemas, Past and Future*. Urbana, Chicago and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 29–41.

Pillai, Meena T. 2017. 'The Many Misogynies of the Malayalam Cinema', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 19 August, 52–58.

Sharma, Sampada. 2018. 'Saroj Khan Defends Casting Couch in Bollywood, says it at least Provides Livelihood', *The New Indian Express*, 24 April 2018. https://indianexpress.com/article/entertainment/bollywood/saroj-khan-casting-couch-5149516/. Accessed on 12 February 2021.

Srinivas, S. V. 2013. *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.

———. 2009. *Megastar: Chiranjeevi and Telugu Cinema after N. T. Rama Rao*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Suneetha, A., Vasudha Nagaraj, K. Sajaya and Tejaswini Madabhushi. 2018. 'In Tollywood the Bottom of the Pyramid is Leading the #MeToo Movement', *The Wire*, 20 April. https://thewire.in/women/in-tollywood-the-bottom-of-the-pyramid-is-leading-the-metoo-movement. Accessed on 6 January 2021.

❖❖

PHOTO ESSAY
MIRZAPUR

GURMMEET SINGH

PUNEET KRISHNA

Who knew that *Mirzapur*, while being conceived on paper, would reach the hearts of millions in such an extraordinary manner, turning viewers into fans of its characters, treating them as their very own—caring for them, getting angry with them, falling in love with them, cheering them on, rooting for them, being saddened by their failures and deaths.

Mirzapur tries to break stereotypes in a very subtle manner: women are aware of their sexuality, even demanding their pleasures as their right; men, despite being powerful publicly, are weak, vulnerable and flawed.

Mirzapur's heroes are dark at various moments, while its villains are humane in others.

Its love stories are not always dewdrops falling from reeds. These love stories are scorched—and scorching. They are, at times, soaked in danger, but no less in passion.

There is drama, comedy, violence, blood, tears; but, most important, there is a degree of humanity in all its characters—and that is what strikes a chord. People watching it can see it and feel it. And that's why, for the viewer, a comforting sense of familiarity takes over despite *Mirzapur* being a story of gangsters, dons and guns. Guns become incidental because the emotions, the struggles, the dreams are all too real and relatable.

The father–son disagreements, the desire to be recognised and rewarded, the need to climb the social ladder for validation from society, the continuation of the family legacy, the need for survival against all odds, physical and emotional fulfilment—all these are emotions to which we relate, irrespective of the fact that most of us

have not seen a gun in our entire lives.

The almost cult fandom that *Mirzapur* has generated is something that no one could foretell or plan for. And this is where science becomes art. No rules apply, no process leads to it—it just happens.

So, if someone were to ask: Is there a formula to all of this? No—a very emphatic no. Because the beauty of any creative work— be it a painting, a book, a poem, a movie, or a show—is that it does not follow a formula. You just go by your instinct and, if it works, you count your blessings. The one thing you can be sure of, though, is of people who pull the ship in the same direction with the same purity and passion. And that's where *Mirzapur* succeeds.

It found the actors who played the parts as if they were born to play them. They did not act—they became them. And that's how a story can be told—by playing the characters in a manner intriguing enough for the viewer to be engaged consistently.

Mirzapur can be dissected endlessly, but the truth is that something magical happened. And magic is better left seen than dissected.

◆

EXCEL MEDIA & ENTERTAINMENT
AMAZON PRIME VIDEO

CAPTIONS

1. Pankaj Tripathi plays Kaleen Bhaiya, king of a crumbling empire (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

2. Cinematographer Sanjay Kapoor and Director Gurmmeet Singh in the thick of action (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

3. Shadows and hard light play a role in setting the mood (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

4. A glimpse of the machinery behind the scenes (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

5. Maqbool—always present, quiet, immovable (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

6. A true ensemble cast, with rich characters (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

7. The troubled heir to the throne (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

8. Dimpy and Sweety—simple dreams (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

9. Babloo Pandit, the moral compass (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

10. Technicalities of shooting a character in a double role (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

11. The effort that makes it all look effortless (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

12. Munna with his gang (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

13. The first kill (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

14. End of innocence (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

15. Strong women amidst patriarchy (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

16. Political aspirations (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

17. Father and son, a recurring theme (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

18. The new contender (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

19. Shipra Acharya giving the final touches to prosthetics (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

20. No holds barred (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

21. Three generations of the Tripathis (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

22. Violence becomes a drug (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

23. Hectic days, fighting against time (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

24. Gun culture explored (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

25. Homegrown prosthetics especially designed for Mirzapur (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

26. Acting on screen requires technical precision (Season 1). Photographer: Saurabh Gupta

27. Far from the brash Guddu (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

28. Fighting for survival (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

29. Finally, on the same page (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

30. A family falls (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

31. End of an era (Season 2). Photographer: Pratha Narang

◆

MASCULINITY IN TRANSIT
Remaking Male Stardom in Turn-of-the-Millennium Bengali Cinema

TRINANKUR BANERJEE

The release of *Fighter* (dir: Rabi Kinagi; 2011) consolidated a tendency palpable in Bengali popular cinema for at least a decade: the emphasis on physicality as a signifier of the hero's masculinity. Jeet, its male lead, became the first hero in Bengali cinema to sport 'eight-pack abs', a trend that arrived in Bengal rather late. By the late 2000s, thanks to Shah Rukh Khan and Aamir Khan, six-pack/eight-pack abs had entered popular parlance. Operating within the ambit of a global body culture, these Bollywood superstars had cemented such exhibitionist physicality as an industry trend in films like *Om Shanti Om* (dir: Farah Khan; 2007) and *Ghajini* (dir: A. R. Murugadoss; 2008). However, in a promotional interview before the film's release, Jeet traced his inspiration not to these Bollywood superstars, but to the Tamil star Suriya, reminding the interviewer that Suriya was its pioneer in the Tamil version of *Ghajini* (dir: A. R. Murugadoss; 2005).[1] Although such a cosmopolitan body culture was prevalent in Bollywood from the turn of the millennium, represented by stars like John Abraham and Hrithik Roshan, Jeet's claim is instructive. Rejecting the notion that contemporary Bengali popular cinema is nothing but a local imitation of Bollywood, Jeet acknowledged the translocal connections between Bengali and south Indian regional popular cinemas. Further, he confessed that he was wary of his sculpted body's reception on screen, and could only overcome his inhibition when the director was confident of the shot.

Jeet's inhibition was symptomatic of a cultural prohibition around the expression of masculinity in terms of sheer physical attributes when, even after Bengali cinema had accepted the depiction of violence and sexuality as part of its representational mores,

a muscular physique was not a desirable attribute for the hero. *Fighter's* commercial success, however, proved that a reconfiguration of male stardom was already in motion in Bengali cinema, aided by changing conditions in the industry. Focusing on the star text of Jeet, the article examines how, in the figure of Jeet, turn-of-the-millennium Bengali cinema found a favourable *topos* that helped mediate shifting media–industry codes, and consolidated certain textual tendencies. Tracing the historical development of masculinity on screen in Bengali cinema from the 1980s, I analyse how the specificities of Jeet's figurations—his non-Bengali identity, his physiognomy and physicality, and his erstwhile career as a model—contribute to the process. Through a textual–industrial analysis of his films—such as his Bengali debut film *Saathi* (dir: Haranath Chakraborty; 2002), *Aakrosh* (dir: Prashanta Nanda; 2004), *Wanted* (dir: Rabi Kinagi; 2010), *Fighter,* and the printed material published in the popular Bengali entertainment biweekly *Anandalok*—this article suggests that studying Jeet's stardom could offer a historical argument for contemporary trends in Bengali cinema as well as its future trajectories.

WHERE WAS MASCULINITY IN BENGALI CINEMA?

Jeet's purported unease with stripping to reveal rigorously crafted eight-pack abs reflects an assumed cultural consensus about Bengali masculinity on screen. Shaped primarily in relation to the figure of Uttam Kumar in the 1950s, the body of the romantic hero 'had a delicateness given to feminine overlay of meanings, combined with an upright posture signifying the moral optimism associated with the nationalist youth' (Biswas, 2002: 105). All through the late 1960s, when violence and unrest on the street boiled over to the screen, the shift produced new idioms of violence as an integral part of the text. For a film culture that took pride in claiming its moral superiority over Bombay cinema in its rejection of violence and sexual excess as vehicles of commercial success,[2] Bengali cinema's acceptance of such idioms is perhaps most comprehensible in Uttam Kumar's reconfiguration in *Amanush* (dir: Shakti Samanta; 1975) and *Kalankini Kankabati* (dir: Uttam Kumar; 1981), where he oscillated between tender romance and vengeful action. The fact that he had accommodated such changes in his final years underlines the manner in which the dual demand of romance and action from the hero was fast becoming the industry norm by the 1980s.

The watershed moment of Uttam Kumar's death in 1980 came at a period of transition for Bengali cinema, which had yet to decide on the proper concoction of romance and action, and the male star who could be the appropriate vehicle for such textual heteronomy. As Spandan Bhattacharya argues, although Sukhen Das, Ranjit Mullick, Victor Banerjee, among others, cumulatively compensated for the action hero in the early 1980s, it was not until the emergence of Prosenjit Chatterjee, in the late 1980s, did Bengali cinema find a star whose performance could be regarded as an effective fusion of romance and action.[3] All through the 1990s, the extent of his stardom was such that *Anandalok* once referred to the Bengali film industry as '*Prosenjit-er Samrajyo*' (Prosenjit's empire).[4] Unlike the action heroes of the early 1980s, who were often portrayed as subaltern figures living on urban margins or suburbs, involved in a tale of vengeance against the powers that be, Prosenjit's youthful, supple features found favour in genres such as teenage/college romance, virtually absent in Bengali cinema before his arrival. With his vibrant attire and brash demeanour, Prosenjit's performance would emulate elements of cosmopolitan–urban youth in a local context in *Pronami Tomaye* (dir: Prabhat Roy; 1989) or *Katha Dilam* (dir: Rajat Das; 1991). Although revenge narratives did not fall out of favour, Prosenjit's physiognomy was at no time particularly suited to the vengeful countenance common in action heroes of the early 1980s. Hence, his characters in *Pabitra Papi* (dir: Anup Sengupta; 1997) and *Mayer Adhikar* (dir: Narayan Ghosh; 1998) were simpletons or morally upright nobodies. Lacking the moral ambiguity of earlier action heroes, the action sequences in his films were geared towards righting wrongs. As Prosenjit neared his forties in the late 1990s, college romances became few and far between in his oeuvre; his age increasingly became a visible hindrance in sporting such a persona. While he remained at the fore, his performance in *Unishe April* (dir: Rituparno Ghosh; 1994), coupled with an extensive interview with Ghosh in October 1998 in *Anandalok*, hinted at a developing cultural–industrial project to situate Prosenjit as a star who could cater to *Bhadralok* taste/culture as well, a social class which had rejected him as emblematic of the 'bad taste' that Bengali popular cinema of that era came to represent.[5]

The new millennium also saw the Bengali media–industry landscape undergo a tectonic change with *Sasurbari Zindabad*

(dir: Haranath Chakraborty; 2000), which not only broke box office records, but was also Shree Venkatesh Films' (SVF) first major production venture. Starting modestly as distributors, SVF had produced a few commercially successful films, such as *Bhai Amar Bhai* (dir: Swapan Saha; 1996), with modest budgets, only to break the budget ceiling with *Sasurbari Zindabad.* Piggybacking on their existing distribution networks, over the next decade SVF emerged as a studio with a scale of vertical integration unprecedented in a local industry historically dominated by fly-by-night producers.[6] At a time when the frugality of set design in Bengali cinema had reached mythical heights, SVF hired Kaushik Sarkar as the art director of *Sasurbari Zindabad* to provide the necessary 'gloss' that would allow Bengali cinema to compete with its already globalised other—Bollywood.[7] Added to this was the growing clamour for a 'fresh face', asserted by producers and print media alike, which would mesh seamlessly with the shifting codes of the industry.[8] Jeet's arrival at such a juncture must then be read through the resonances it produced with respect to aspirations, emergences and reconfigurations in the industry.

ONE HERO, MANY FIGURES

Following the ground-breaking success of *Sasurbari Zindabad*, SVF embarked on another lavish production in *Saathi,* promoted as *ek koti takar chobi* (a film costing ₹1 crore, a first in Bengali cinema). *Saathi*'s premise of teenage romance did not attract Prosenjit. He later revealed that he had turned down the offer, asking the producers to look for a 'fresh face'.[9] Involving a blind heroine and her numerous misrecognitions, the film's narrative reaches its climax in the eventual union of the couple through an epiphanic recognition. The producers later conceded that the pairing of newcomers Jeet and Priyanka Trivedi, as a realistic couple enacting romantic travails, appealed to the audience.[10] *Saathi*'s success signified the return of teenage romance to popular Bengali cinema, almost a decade after the success of the Prosenjit–Rituparno pairing in the early 1990s.

Saathi not only induced generic shifts, but also influenced industry practices—unprecedented budgets, the investment in significant amounts of non-local creative labour from south India—and was acknowledged as a blockbuster, the first in Bengali cinema.[11] Nevertheless, neither the remake phenomenon

nor the involvement of non-local creative labour was a novelty. Swapan Saha, one of the most notable directors of the 1990s, had popularised remakes of Bangladeshi films; co-productions between the two Bengali film industries, separated by a national border, was a common affair. It is important to remember that these remakes are not translations, but translocal reproductions. Linguistic familiarity and cultural commonalities aside, Bangladeshi films, with their crude action sequences and inexpensively designed sets, provided a model of frugal production for financially-ailing Bengali cinema.[12] But, producing 'certified copies' of south Indian films (mostly Tamil and Telugu) requires the bridging of certain cultural gaps that such textual reproductions inevitably entail.

Saathi is a remake of the Tamil film *Thulladha Manamum Thullum* (dir: Ezhil; 1999). In Jeet's case, most of his films were remakes of Telugu films. Indeed, his screen debut, too, was a commercially unsuccessful Telugu film, *Chandu* (dir: K. Veeru; 2001). Highly stylised action sequences became the hallmark of Tamil and Telugu films of this period, which gave Telugu stars Ravi Teja, Prabhas and Nagarjuna ample opportunity to exhibit fiery machismo in their performances as well as action sequences. Sporting stylised moustaches and beards, with square jawlines, close-ups of their rugged countenances are central to the affective intensity of their action sequences. The Bengali hero, on the contrary, was required to be handsome and possess a 'sweet smile', as an article in *Anandalok* once put it.[13] Although action sequences were plentiful in Prosenjit's oeuvre, in popular perception his romantic persona as well as his performances in familial melodramas remained his most enduring qualities, often attributed to his romantic eyes and soft countenance. Significantly, the masculine features described earlier were the attributes of popular villains: Joy Badlani, Biplab Chatterjee, and, more recently, Rajatava Dutta. The investment in Jeet's machismo becomes obvious when, before *Saathi*'s release, a promotional appearance in *Anandalok* highlighted his physical attributes—'chest 40'—hailing a physique that would reassure women they were safe with him, no matter what.[14] Despite *Saathi* being a romantic melodrama, Jeet's proclivity towards action sequences did not go unnoticed in the film. In an interview in 2003, when asked whether he could compete with Prosenjit in terms of song-and-dance sequences, Jeet reminded the interviewer

that in fact his star value derived from action sequences for which he displayed a natural ability.[15] His contorted face in close-up during these sequences, with its excess of beard, moustache and deep eyebrow, soon became a visual trope in many of his films' promotional materials, a recent example being *Boss 2: Back to Rule* (dir: Baba Yadav; 2017).

Further, as S. V. Srinivas argues, the rise of 'below-the-line costs' marked turn-of-the-millennium Tamil and Telugu 'regional blockbuster' films, where, compared to star salaries, the overall cost increased because of 'locations changed, extras increased, action sequences enhanced with more expensive visual effects, and so on' (2016: 4). Since *Saathi* featured newcomers, its investment in below-the-line costs was particularly visible in the action and song-and-dance sequences, as compared to Bengali films of the 1990s. For example, *Sangharsha* (dir: Haranath Chakraborty; 1995), one of the biggest commercial successes of the 1990s, made on a budget of ₹40 lakh, blows up rickshaws to produce spectacular action sequences, involves shabbily dressed extras and simple body movements for fight sequences. The first action sequence in *Saathi* includes the destruction of multiple cars, a complex choreographed fight sequence, and the extras involved in the numerous song-and-dance sequences and crowd scenes indicate a significant upgrade in the quality of production. *Saathi* confirmed SVF's decision[16] to emulate the production model of Tamil and Telugu films to succeed and compete with Bollywood at a regional level, with Jeet's star body as the perfect vehicle for this process. So much so, even in a film like *Nater Guru* (dir: Haranath Chakraborty; 2003), a romantic comedy adapted from a Bengali novel, Jeet's introduction features the rescue of a CGI-crafted baby caught amidst city traffic, a scene that seems right out of a south Indian film.[17] Such instances are indicative of a process where increasing investment in below-the-line costs was becoming a trend in Bengali cinema of that period.

If Jeet's action-hero persona benefitted from his physique and physiognomy, his figuration as a romantic hero who could assimilate in a Bengali middle-class milieu, consistent with the demands of the narrative, was still under construction, largely on account of his non-Bengali identity (his name is Jeetendra Madnani). Indeed, after Jeet's initial success, Prosenjit welcomed the young star to the industry in an interview, but argued that he would need to master the

'Bengali tongue' to sustain his stardom.[18] Jeet's lack of 'Bengali-ness' was carefully camouflaged by his ambiguous sobriquet (a name common to Bengali and non-Bengali milieus alike) and his upbringing in Kolkata, but perhaps the most prominent aide in this process was *Anandalok*. In March 2004, in an extensive interview, Jeet's non-Bengali identity was elided in favour of projecting the imaginary of middle-class Bengali Bhadralok through a detailed description of his everyday activities, stressing on his umbilical connection to Kolkata.[19] After numerous successes in family melodramas early in his career, such as *Nater Guru*, *Bandhan* (dir: Rabi Kinagi; 2004), which helped Jeet assert his competence as a romantic hero, the culmination of this process came in *Krishnakanter Will* (dir: Raja Sen; 2007). Adapted from a well-known Bengali novel, Jeet played a 19th-century Bengali zamindar, which allowed him to exhibit almost all the signifiers of a normative 'Bengali-ness'—be it the attire, gesture or gait.

Jeet's ability to move between multiple registers of screen persona thus indicates a plasticity that becomes materially visible early in his career through continuous (and often unprecedented in Bengali cinema) experiments with physiognomic features—hairstyle, hair colour, facial hair—and accessories—glasses, earrings, etc. From long hair in *Mastan* (dir: Rabi Kinagi; 2004) and *Ghatak* (dir: Swapan Saha; 2006), to a clean-shaven Bhadralok look in *Krishnakanter Will*, Jeet's mutability indicates not only a reflexivity on his part to continually (re-)assess his star value, but such plasticity also becomes crucial in absorbing a range of masculine features for a wide array of identities for these remakes, since the Tamil and Telugu films involve stars as varied as Pawan Kalyan and Mahesh Babu. Such flexibility is not limited to the facial, but incorporates the corporeal, as is visible in his films *Wanted* and *Fighter*.

BODY AT WORK: METAMORPHOSIS OF THE ACTION HERO

Spandan Bhattacharya argues that in the case of Prosenjit's action-hero figuration, the dominant motif is that of the fatherless hero living on the margins, reflexively amplified by the hagiography of Prosenjit's own fraught relationship with his estranged father (2017: 223). His déclassé status is, then, more a matter of misfortune, and his figure is never fully lumpenised. After *Saathi*, in a series of films over the next couple of years, such as *Shakti* (dir: P. Sambhashiv Rao;

2004) and *Mastan*, Jeet steadily developed a baseborn persona—as a consequence of social turmoil—offering melodramatic potential in its path to righteous existence. Largely popularised by Amitabh Bachchan in Bollywood in the 1970s, these narrative traits were central to Bachchan's iconic status as the 'Angry Young Man', and have survived beyond its contemporaneity and dissipation of its political charge to enjoy widespread popularity as a trope. *Aakrosh* marks both the pinnacle and tripping point of this phase.[20] The film begins with Jeet already deeply involved in illegal activities, a gangster who lives in a palatial mansion with his cronies, separated from his family. His brother arrives from Singapore and attempts to take Jeet back with him. These attempts reveal that Jeet, far from being baseborn, belongs to a Bhadralok family with global mobility and social capital. The film's climax involves the space of the airport, intercut with the space of confrontation, unlike the action films of the past where confrontation is squarely located in rural or suburban spaces, or, at best, on urban margins. *Aakrosh*'s attempt to link local with global is part of Bengali cinema's consistent attempts to index the global in its articulations in all possible ways. In *Jor* (dir: Swapan Saha; 2008), the narrative involves an athlete (played by Jeet) who is to compete in the Asian Games, transporting a woman to her relatives in the United States to ensure her safety. For a director historically associated with staging action and violence far from any indication of the urban, *Jor* was Saha's global gesture, mediated by Jeet. Involving song-and-dance sequences in *City Centre*, a popular shopping mall in Kolkata, and opening with a track-and-field setting where Jeet displays his athletic abilities in cosmopolitan attire, the film alludes repeatedly to the global, routed via Jeet's performing body.

If the star's face condenses the affective intensity that propels the popular, the body's ability to deflect and perform violence completes the figure of the action hero. In Jeet's case, the action hero is not merely a textual rendition, but a discursive construction. Since violence arrived in Bengali cinema as a necessary attraction in the 1980s, stuntmen provided stars with a disposable body for rent to protect the star body from injury, with each star having a fixed dummy.[21] All through the 1990s, Prosenjit's occasional self-reliance in terms of stunts never found a steady discursive presence in public. However, in numerous interviews from the days of his

debut, Jeet has emphasised how he performs all kinds of stunts himself, often specifying those he particularly enjoys. Despite the presence of action directors, fight masters and safety measures, the risk of harm that such decisions entail is then circulated in the form of media reports of minor or major injuries to the star body as well as the star's account of successful stunts, further valourising the star body.[22] Foregrounding his ability to perform his own stunts, Jeet not only positions himself in the global constellation of action heroes who claim to be self-sufficient in their action sequences,[23] but also denies that action sequences are merely a 'highly synthetic spectacle of the body' (Biswas, 2013: 240), performed by editing and special effects. As I have argued earlier, parallel to this process has been the transition from low born masculinity to a more cosmopolitan orientation of the angry young man with *Aakrosh* and *Jor*. These processes reached their zenith in *Wanted* and *Fighter*, two films arriving at the turn of the 2010s.

Wanted, a remake of the Telugu film *Athadu* (dir: Trivikram Srinivas; 2005), features Jeet as the hitman/assassin, a cosmopolitan figure evident in sartorial choices of blazer, washed jeans and leather jacket. Its action sequences, too, are no longer limited to violent fights but extend to elaborate chase sequences where Jeet performs a series of 'impossible' jumps over walls and considerably tall buildings in the opening sequence, occasionally with the help of CGI, assimilating superlative athleticism within his action hero repertoire, and involving more sensible risk in this process than choreographed violence. The sophistication of action sequences aside, the cosmopolitan turn is more pronounced at the paratextual levels of the trailer and title sequences, the visual strategy of which draws from the interface of popular action games and a range of action blockbusters, most notably the *Mission Impossible* franchise. By staging the assassin's hideout with an unsuspecting Bengali family living in an idyllic village, and masquerading as their missing son, the film becomes a local variation of the global–popular genre, combining the premise of familial melodrama in a Bengali village with the cosmopolitan trope of hitman hunting, mediated by the plasticity of Jeet's figure that enables this movement between the two levels of narration.

If *Wanted* signifies the preliminary phase of Jeet's cosmopolitan turn, in *Fighter* it is, quite literally, embodied in his

eight-pack abs. Barring one action sequence, *Fighter*, like most of Jeet's films, is a remake of the Telugu film *Lakshyam* (dir: Srivass; 2007). The near-identical nature of these remakes is evinced by the action sequences in Bengali versions, where choreographed action is in fact a frame-by-frame reproduction of the original. The sequence involves the protagonist escaping from the torture chamber by singlehandedly defeating the police force. Although the sequences in both films follow similar sets of action, in *Fighter* Jeet strips to display eight-pack abs, whereas Gopichand, *Lakshyam*'s hero, never bares his torso. In the Bengali remake, the sequence appears almost presentational, despite the narrative pretext of the torture chamber, as if the star body 'fails to lend itself to, or overtakes, iconic and narrative processing' (ibid.). Narrative continuity is eschewed for the sake of corporeal spectacle, as, immediately after escaping the police station, Jeet appears on screen wearing the same vest that had been torn off his body in the action sequence. Complementing the textual process was *Anandalok*'s publication of Jeet's dietary and exercise regimes in a publicity interview, imitating cosmopolitan fitness magazines engaged in global body culture. If 'plasticity is the core component of a multinodal and fluid understanding of the global', which 'summons up the global as a set of relations between units that are in a continual state of transformation' (Sarkar, 2015: 453), then Jeet's figuration in *Fighter* is plasticity par excellence, for it mediates translocal relations between Bengali cinema and 'regional blockbusters' from south India, while gesturing towards the global.

CONCLUSION: COSMOPOLITAN MASCULINITY, AND AFTER

As international travel and migration, and global transaction and networked lives become increasingly dominant narrative components in Bengali cinema, competing with the global–popular at a local scale, I have argued that a genealogy of such cosmopolitan desire can be traced through Jeet's figure, and how his timely renewal of the local is intimately tied to Bengali cinema's response to globalised cosmopolitanism. Tracing his figuration reveals the manner in which a more cosmopolitan imagination of masculinity has gradually replaced the hegemony of vernacular masculinity in Bengali cultural fields. That the steady growth of the remake culture in Bengali cinema found in Jeet the ideal repository of necessary

corporeal values is evident in the mushrooming of that culture and the emergence of numerous stars from the modelling industry: Hiran, Rishi, among others, but, most important, Dev. Dev has emerged as Jeet's strongest competitor over the 2010s, with the media strategically fanning their rivalry.[24]

Although Jeet has worked across genres in diverse roles in 'neo-Bhadralok cinema', where his physicality is not in demand, Dev's roles in *Zulfiqar* (dir: Srijit Mukherji; 2016) and *Amazon Obhijaan* (dir: Kamaleshwar Mukherjee; 2017), among others, capitalise on his physical excess, framing his muscularity as the singular source of star value. His role as a boxer in *Chaamp* (dir: Raj Chakraborty; 2017) was Dev's six-pack-abs moment, with the corporeal spectacle now firmly assimilated within narrative demands as well as the cultural field. For Jeet, his reflexivity—vis-à-vis global–popular trends—continues to evolve. Recent interviews show Jeet projecting himself as a media entrepreneur and artist more preoccupied with 'content creation' for local industry. Such an attitude not only underlines his familiarity with the glossary of global media discourses that simulate cosmopolitan suavity,[25] but also the fact that the global–popular imagination is yet to run its full course in the Bengali media industry—Jeet's star text could be a trajectory to follow for any intimation of its future.

◆

NOTES

1. See *Anandalok,* 27 November 2010, pp. 38–40. The interview also contained a detailed description of Jeet's dietary regime as well as his initial inhibition about flaunting eight-pack abs.

2. In *Ultorath,* a popular Bengali entertainment magazine in the 1950s and 1960s, in response to various letters to editors concerning Bengali cinema's unique appeal, the moral superiority of Bengali cinema was often hailed as the shining example of how cinema does not need to succumb to violence and sexual excess to become commercially successful. There are multiple instances of such letters throughout this period.

3. See Bhattacharya (2017). With regard to Prosenjit's stardom, perhaps the most competitive figure in the industrial–cultural field was Chiranjeet Chakraborty, popularly known as Chiranjeet. But, unlike Prosenjit, his success came not from teenage action-romance, but to a large extent from devotionals and mythological films. Tracing the differences in their stardom, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

4. See the interview with Prosenjit in *Anandalok,* 8 July 2002, p. 35. This myth later slips into *Autograph* (dir: Srijit Mukherji; 2010). Here, Prosenjit plays the role of Arun Chatterjee (Uttam Kumar's original name), a star of yesteryears, and, at a significant moment in the film, declares in an emphatic manner, '*Ami* Arun Chatterjee! *Ami* industry!' (I am Arun Chatterjee! I am industry!), an allusion to Prosenjit in the 1990s.

5. See Rituparno Ghosh's interview with Prosenjit, *Anandalok,* 17 October 1998, pp. 15–26. Prosenjit was often derided as 'Posenjit' (a mispronunciation in rural dialect) by the Bengali middle class. Prosenjit's subsequent collaboration with Rituparno (often hailed as Satyajit Ray's protégé and a major figure of Indian art cinema in the 1990s and 2000s), led to a major re-evaluation of his stardom by the Bengali Bhadralok.

6. See '*Taligonjer doiroth: Anjan bonam Swapan*' (Tussle in Tollygunge: Anjan v/s Swapan) in *Anandalok*, 29 November 1997, pp. 4–14; 23–25; 79–82. Anjan Choudhury and Swapan Saha were the most prolific directors in Bengali cinema in the 1980s and 1990s. Framed as rivals, the two directors were unanimous in claiming that since Bengali cinema did not have a studio system, capital came from fly-by-night producers who were best suited to ensure the recovery of investment in a film.

7. Bombay cinema has historically been framed as Bengali cinema's cultural other. Even in the 1950s, *Ultorath* would often claim that Bengali cinema was culturally superior to Bombay cinema because it showed restraint in expressions of romance and desire. Such hegemonic claims tried to resist Bombay cinema's industrial dominance through other means.

8. See the interview '*Saathi-r Jeet-Priyanka r Joyjoykar*' (Three Cheers for Jeet–Priyanka of *Saathi*) with Mahendra Soni and Shrikant Mohta, in *Anandalok*, 8 July 2002, pp. 16–17. Here, the producer duo laid out how they had envisioned changing the landscape of Bengali cinema in terms of production values and casting decisions.

9. See the interview with Prosenjit, *Anandalok,* 27 June 2003, p. 37.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Saathi*'s box office collection of ₹9.78 crore, even without adjusting for inflation, makes it one of the highest-grossing Bengali films of all time.

12. Swapan Saha once described these films as '*chhawta gaan, charte* fight' (six songs and four fights), indicating how these films offer a formula for Bengali cinema to emulate. See '*Taligonjer doiroth: Anjan bonam Swapan*' (Tussle in Tollygunge: Anjan v/s Swapan) in *Anandalok*, 29 November 1997, pp. 4–14.

13. See '*Ekhon Ranjit*' ('Ranjit Now'), on Ranjit Mullick, in *Anandalok*, 29 June 1985, p. 40. The article begins with how the star is generally imagined in Bengali cinema, confirming the consensus regarding the imaginary.

14. See *Anandalok*, 22 June 2002, p. 25. These publicity stills recognise the 'freshness' of Jeet's face and his masculine appearance. I have translated the title of one of these stills into English.

15. See 'Hat-trick', interview with Jeet, *Anandalok*, 27 June 2003, pp. 22–24. Although Jeet was yet to star in a full-fledged action film, realising his own forte was crucial to developing his action hero persona.

16. See the interview '*Sathi-r Jeet-Priyanka r Joyjoykar*' (Three Cheers for Jeet–Priyanka of *Saathi*) with Mahendra Soni and Shrikant Mohta, in *Anandalok*, 8 July 2002, pp. 16–17. When asked why they had decided to remake a Tamil film, their answer was that the film was successful in its region—rather a gamble for them that had paid off.

17. Such instances abound in south Indian films. To cite just one example from recent years, *Attarintiki Daredi* (dir: Trivikram Srinivas; 2013) features an expansive (and expensive) action sequence to introduce the hero, Pawan Kalyan, only to arrive at the premise of romantic comedy minutes later.

18. See the interview with Prosenjit Chatterjee, *Anandalok,* 27 August 2003, p. 31. As is the trend with any entertainment magazine, these interviews often try to drum up a sense of rivalry between the established star and the new sensation. Prosenjit's critique of Jeet's diction showed how, even for his generation, the concept of Bengali hero was tied to a sense of locality.

19. See '*Jeet-er Saradin*' (A Day in the Life of Jeet), a photo-feature on Jeet in *Anandalok,* 27 February 2004, pp. 56–57. The photo-feature begins by describing Jeet's home as resembling a typical Bengali middle-class household, filled with warmth instead of grandeur.

20. Jeet was awarded in the special category of 'Best Angry Young Man' at the 2004 *Anandalok* Awards, in continuity with *Anandalok*'s cultural project around Jeet's stardom.

21. See '*Bangla Chobir Stuntman-ra*' (The Stuntmen of Bengali Cinema) in *Anandalok,* 28 June 1997, pp. 22–25. The increasing number of action sequences in Bengali cinema in the 1980s meant the growing influence of stuntmen in the industry. By 1986, the Movie Stuntmen Association of Eastern Zone had been formed.

22. Jeet often shares images of his stunts on social media platforms to fuel the discourse. See 'Top Bengali Actor Jeet Injured While Performing Stunt for his Upcoming Film, *Boss*–2', *The New Indian Express,* 31 August 2017. http://cms.newindianexpress.com/videos/entertainment/2017/mar/11/top-bengali-actor-jeet-injured-while-performing-stunt-for-his-upcoming-film-boss--2-100763.html. Accessed on 13 October 2020.

23. See, for example, 'Why Tom Cruise is Making Stunt History in *Mission Impossible: Rogue Nation*', *Men's Journal*. https://www.mensjournal.com/health-fitness/why-tom-cruise-making-stunt-history-mission-impossible-rogue-nation/. Accessed on 18 January 2021.

24. There are numerous instances of *Anandalok* framing the star-duo as arch rivals, probing each star about the other in interviews. In the 27 February 2019 issue of *Anandalok*, the front cover is dedicated to Dev and Jeet's rivalry, with a long article devoted to the two stars vying for screen space and release dates.

25. See the interview with Jeet, *Anandalok*, 12 June 2018, pp. 8–13. Throughout the interview, rather than upholding his star persona, Jeet stresses that he is an independent entrepreneur generating content for Bengali films, has a positive attitude, and is not associated with any particular lobby or production house as such. The interview is replete with phrases that media entrepreneurs often use, such as 'popular pulse', 'positive attitude', 'unique content', etc.

REFERENCES

Bhattacharya, Spandan. 2017. 'The Action Heroes of Bengali Cinema: Industrial, Technological and Aesthetic Determinants of Popular Film Culture, 1980s–1990s', *South Asian History and Culture*, 8 (2): 205–30.

Biswas, Moinak. 2013. 'Bodies in Syncopation', in Meheli Sen and Anustup Basu (eds.), *Figurations in Indian Film*. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

———. 2002. 'Historical Realism: Modes of Modernity in Indian Cinema, 1940–60.' Unpublished dissertation, Monash University.

Sarkar, Bhaskar. 2015. 'Plasticity and the Global', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media,* 56 (2): 451–71.

Srinivas, S. V. 2016. 'Rajinikanth and the "Regional Blockbuster"', *Working Papers of the Chicago Tamil Forum,* 3: 1–37.

◆◆

THE GROUNDS OF CINEMA

'Geo'politics and 'Geo'aesthetics
in Documentaries of India's Northeast

PUJITA GUHA

INTRODUCTION

Recent work in Indian film studies argues that regional cinemas are place-makers. Cinematic regions engage with the act of indexing spaces and places, recognising objects, spaces and landmarks in relation to one another, much as a map would. This articulation of space weaves notions of place, location, text, language, market, populace and idioms that travel in and out of a region (Srinivas, 2015: vii–viii). It is marked by ebbs and flows, and, as a place, is constructed by politics, power and publics (ibid.). Others, like Kathryn Hardy, argue that regional cinema is doubly cartographic: on the one hand, locating and fixing spaces through its aesthetic practices (signposting locales through visuals, lyrics and dialogues), but also simultaneously indexing routes of consumption and circulation (2015). While I am informed by this work on cinematic regions and regional cinemas, my own work begins from a slightly different premise. I ask: If regional cinemas are indeed cartographic, indexing locations (spaces and places), how do they encounter the ecological materiality of the lands which they traverse? (Conley, 2007; Bruno, 2018). How do the material formations of land, water and environments shape what we think of regional cinemas and its cartographies? While I recognise cinematic regions as geopolitical imaginaries, I maintain that the geopolitical is incomplete without fully recognising the *geo* in the geopolitical. The geo prefix in Latin refers to earth or land, and concurrently, to our planetary habitation as shaped by the ecological, material elements around us. Therefore, this paper examines how regional cinemas

articulate a geopolitical aesthetic, of spatial or place-bound politics, on the one hand, while engaging with the material 'geo' (earth/land) in geography. Although this could be an expanded investigation into how environmental conditions shape cinematic regions, as they travel beyond their locality through a larger circulatory infrastructure (Jaikumar, 2019), here I will focus largely on cinema's representational encounter with the environment. I ask: How do environments—i.e., specific configurations of land and water— shape our aesthetic regimes and our imaginations of the region on screen?

Traditionally, film/media scholarship on the environment has argued that 'environmental' films (especially documentaries) are a distinctive genre that attune us to such environmental perils as climate change, deforestation, etc. (Willoquet-Maricondi, 2010). However, recent scholarship has also theorised cinema as an environmental medium itself. It demonstrates how cinema saturates our living spaces and screens, thereby mediating the inter-relationships between nature and culture, subjects and objects, man and matter (Rust, et al., 2013; Lavin and Kaplan, 2017; Chu, 2017). This paper sits at the cusp of these two imaginaries of the filmic environment. While I look at environmental films—films about natural landscapes and precarious environments—I remain invested in doing an environmental reading of films: to see how relationships between space, land(scape) and cultural habits are formed and mediated by these films. The two films that I analyse in detail—Haobam Paban Kumar's *Phum Shang* (Floating Life, 2014) and Subasri Krishnan's *What the Fields Remember* (2015)—set up a dialogue between the environmental configurations of land and water, and the political imaginaries of India's Northeast.

Phum Shang focuses on the precarious lives of fishermen living on *phumdis* (floating, fragile biogeomasses) in Loktak Lake, Manipur, and the government's attempts to oust them from there. For the government, the fishermen pose a hindrance to electrical plant and dam development projects. *What the Fields Remember*, on the other hand, is a documentary on the Nellie massacre where the predominantly Hindu Assamese population massacred Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants to the state. The film is situated in the Barak Valley of Assam where the massacre took place. In these documentaries, a focus on land and its material

configurations remains central to their articulation of cultural and social politics. They allow us to understand how the Northeast's films—documentaries, in particular—detail an encounter between the geologic and the geopolitical. But before we proceed any further, three questions merit further answers here: Why documentaries? Why cinemas of the Northeast? And how does regional thinking speak to environmental concerns?

THE 'GEO'POLITICS OF A REGION

My intention to read the Northeast's films through a dialogue between the geoaesthetic and the geologic speaks to how the Northeast is understood as a geopolitical region to begin with. As Sanjib Baruah notes, the Northeast as a directional qualifier already places the region as a periphery in relation to the presumed centre of India's Hindi–Hindutva mainland (2020: 1–2). This formative sense of difference, understood through a (post)colonial history of conquest, apathetic indirect rule, and the violent suppression of armed rebellion and genocides, I aver, also has its distinct environmental bearings. The relation between the region's geopolitical history and its environment has been quite direct, given the manner in which it has historically been configured as a zone for environmental engineering or extraction (ibid.: 2–3; Kikon, 2019; Bhattacharya and Pachuau, 2019; Nag, 2016). Imagined as an eastern equivalent of the Northwest Frontier Province, the Northeast Frontier of British Imperial India was a variegated landscape, bursting with such natural resources as hydroelectricity and coal readily made available for expropriation through conquest, dispossession and control. On becoming a region, its abstraction as a singular unit was thereby tied to its reshaping as a resource frontier that needed to be mapped and governed. In the context of *Phum Shang* and *What the Fields Remember*, I look at how the specific materialities of landscapes and their histories speak of the Northeast's regional imaginaries as a resource frontier and cultural outlier to the Indian nation state. Within environmental humanities, the region points to an in-between-ness between the very local, with its evocation of the proximate and embodied, *and* super-abstract geopolitical areas which suggest a very diffuse sense of the material (Chang, 2020: 17). Thus, the region is a scalar construct caught between the local and the national, or even between the global and the national on

planetary scales, always strung between the micro and the macro. To think regionally allows us to contemplate how embodied practice and situated geographies meet larger, more abstracted notions of space. Thereby, I hope to explain how the cinemas of the Northeast, which I discuss, straddle local and national politics. My imagination of the region in cinema is then grasped more environmentally rather than through the usual lenses of ethnicity, traditional geopolitics or language. And while the Northeast is not a homogeneous environmental formation, it shares a common ground through its palpable cultural precariousness precipitated by climate change, resource extraction, violent developmentalism, and so on.

Scholarship on Northeast cinemas has focused mainly on the metaphorical uses of landscape as they shape its regional identity. Looking at Jyotiprasad Agarwala's *Joymoti* (1935), believed to be the first Assamese film, Gaurav Rajkhowa argues how the film creates an Assamese identity through its suturing of multiple geographic spaces to construct a unified Hindu-ised Assam (2015: 120–21). Similarly, Swikrita Dowerah and Debarshi Prasad Nath argue that the Northeast's cinematic landscapes, especially its mountainous forests rife with 'insurgency movements' and tribal resistance, enact or represent cinematic frontiers that need to be tamed and controlled through conquest and militarisation (2019: 208–12). While these critiques of representation illuminate how landscapes mobilise certain political or public affects, my interest is in the manner in which the specific material and geological contours of the landscape shape cinematic form. Instead of being mute objects readily captured by the cinematic apparatus, landscapes are material and discursive networks which shape cinematic images even as images mediate them in turn. To understand this mutual affectivity between cinema and the environment, I perform a milieu-specific analysis by foregrounding the environmental conditions in which these films are situated (Jue, 2020: 13).

I turn to documentaries to think through these questions, since documentaries make a realist claim for specificity and situatedness. Documentaries, by their very nature, often accentuate the geospatial registers of cinema—a film's situatedness in a location (Walker, 2015: 63–64). They claim site-specificity, where questions of movement, mediation and navigation through the space loom large. The placement of the camera at a site is the keystone of the

documentary's claim to realism: the filmmaker must have been recording at the site. Documentary studies have, however, refuted any naive claims to realism by highlighting the documentary's constructedness and proximity to fiction (Renov, 1993; Nichols, 1991). Similarly, documentaries, while referring to fixed/sites or locations, are nevertheless spatial constructions, modulating our affective, perceptual schema, our experiences of belonging to site as it were (Walker, 2015; Bruno 2018). In my work, thus, I think through both the documentary's claims to its situatedness as well as its construction of our relationship to the environment.

While I explore these connections later, I wish to foreground that both the films I study, with their focus on phumdis and alluvial deltas, also fundamentally challenge our notion of the geo-graphic or the geo-logic. For much of 20th-century history, the geological has been associated with solidity and durability: land, after all, does not move,[1] not at least within our limited human experience (Jue, 2020: 5–7). Land testifies to permanence and resilience: to be grounded is to be firmly sure. However, phumdis and alluvium are fluid and mobile forms of land, mutative and drifting—terra infirma. They ask us to imagine new articulations on time and the geological—understandings of memory and belonging—and unsettle our habitual terrestrial forms of politics. My work thus traces how these films augment a sense of the marginal, liminal or peripheral immanent to the Northeast in multiple ways. They not only speak of political belonging and subjectivity at the fringes of the nation state, but also speak *from* a land itself in a peripheral or liminal condition—a land not stable and firm, but precarious and drifting. This paper thereby articulates a material *and* historical–cultural position of thinking land—the geo—from the margins.

SUTURING LAND

With a quarter of *Phum Shang* remaining, an amphibious dredger tears down the local fishermen's bamboo huts on the lake's phumdis. The term 'amphibious' is potent here. While meant to move seamlessly between land and water, this amphibious dredger perverts such a promise. As it wades through the shallow waters of the lake, it slowly dredges through the fragile phumdis in its path. Kumar frames this upfront—albeit at a distance—as the dredger slowly cuts across the frame, its low industrial hum engulfing our soundscape.

Here, one sees entangled ecological and political violence: the simultaneous destruction of native marginalised communities and a fragile environment. The government runs this operation under the pretext of development as it unfolds in cinematic slow time. This destruction tears apart an ecosystem and its people; a violent separation with perhaps no point of return. *Phum Shang* closely observes the precarious lives led by the lake's fishing communities, the resistance they mount against government officialdom (a nexus of the state and central governments) and the army. And yet, much of the film is also concerned with a detailed account of the community's everyday life—moving sinuously between the phumdis (littered and choked with plastic waste), catching fish in the lake, selling the catch in local markets. In an extended sequence, Kumar documents a key ritual in the lake's calendar, the '*Phum ngaoba matam*' (Manimala, 2015). Roughly translated as the season where the floating mass goes wild, it corresponds to the fall season, when winds become active, drifting the phumdis away from each other. Kumar documents the community's joint efforts to pull the drifting phumdis close to one another, interlocking them. They tie the phumdis with strong threads and later anchor them with stones to the lake below. For a film that captures the quiet, quasi-bucolic life of fishermen on the lake, this scene stands out for capturing a community in action. We see dextrous bodies, women and men alike, pulling and pushing the strips of decaying land, laying bamboos and stones, jostling, calling out to one another, heaving breathlessly.

If Paban Kumar metonymises the extractive process of tearing through the land and its people through the dredger's monstrosity, here he visualises the act of world-building—with the fisherfolk stringing the landmass together—as a communitarian act. Suturing phumdis in the fall is a seasonal ritual on account of the winds, but with Kumar's juxtaposition of it to the government's dredging and dispossession operations, the same ritual gains political significance as an act of communal reparative world-building. In this montage, he underscores suturing as the key cosmotechnic in the Meitei fishermen's worldview. In classical Western philosophy, *techne* (skill) is often opposed to *physis* (nature), as the act of building things anew (Miller, 2013: 68). It names the human processes of assembling parts in a useful way 'a prosthetic tool', extending man's inventiveness and ingenuity (ibid.). However, for the fishermen, suturing as a techne

exceeds its status as a mere skill. It embodies their cosmological belief in the entanglement of nature and culture in the material practices and communitarian philosophies that ground life on the lake (Manimala, 2018). Thus, suturing connects the community to its cosmological or ecological beliefs, a cosmotechnic in Yuk Hui's words (2017). In its material reality, suturing as a techne is, nevertheless, shaped by phumdis and their particularities as drifting land masses. If land has been predominantly imagined as a stable, durable entity in the history of thought, then phumdis render land as motile, drifting pieces of yarn that can be woven together. Thus, suturing is a milieu-specific act, stitching together both the decaying shards of land and the community alike.

In film theory, suture (which owes its roots to psychoanalytic theory) refers to the process where the spectator is tied to the signifier onscreen. Suture is what completes a chain of images, transforming disparate signs into a unified discourse (Heath, 1981: 85–86). Suturing indicates the very moment in which the cohesion of meaning is established (Casetti, 2011), and the structure of discourse is closed off to inspection. Within Hollywood cinema, Stephen Heath locates suturing in the simple act of shot-reverse shot (and the larger cinematic Hollywood classical narrative tradition) and how it creates a coherent scene. What Heath misses, and what interests me, are the grounds (quite literally) upon which such notions of suturing are based. The classical Hollywood system, I would like to argue, is 'terrestrially biased', based upon the solidity and fixity that land provides (Jue, 2020: 5–6). It assumes an unwavering force of gravity, as well as the fixity of land, which gives the camera a grounding and a horizon. This applies to the spectator as well, siting up straight or lying down, whether alone or in a theatre, always solidly tethered to land. Films such as *Gravity* (dir: Alfonso Cuaron; 2013) therefore posit a problem: How does one manoeuvre a camera where there exists no sense of up and down, no gravitational bearings, or spatial orientation or landmarks in the dark? And all of which leads me to ask: What do phumdis, with their fluid, mutative sense of grounding, offer about the cinematic medium?

Phumdis speak to a gravitational condition of being on land, but it is a land that is continuously floating and drifting, needing to be sutured. As if to imbue this spirit of weaving the world together, the film sutures this scene by focussing on the rhythms and movements of labouring bodies as they pull and push the land, mimicking the mildly undulating pace of the phumdis. Cinema has long been premised on the notion of the cut, where useful frames are extracted from redundant unnecessary ones, a sifting of signal from noise. If, as Kumar highlights, the cut (of the land) is a violent, extractive technique that separates the people from their land, then he posits the logic of suturing in the film, stitching together disparate but interconnected shots that follow the land, its subjects and their rhythms. His is a rhythmic montage tethered to geologic undulations and the communitarian practice of suturing land. Kumar places the camera in the heart of the action, closely observing the action and planting himself intimately into the scene. Kumar's camera alternates between the phumdis or the boats that hover close by, never quite stable, gaining solid ground. The film thus responds to the milieu of Loktak Lake in myriad ways. Floating constantly, the camera enfolds us into the mildly floating rhythms of the phumdis, while also deploying these rhythms to weave sequences where the community sutures together land. In this way, Kumar juxtaposes the cosmological value of suturing land against the violent technics of the amphibious dredger, which represents the state.

To conclude, *Phum Shang* suggests multiple ways of belonging to land. Phumdis show how land, far from being solid, has a sense of contingency or vulnerability amplified by developmental projects and climate change, but how this precarious land is inhabited by people who experience this instability as a consequence of state violence, facing the threat of dislocation and dispossession. Kumar maps this dual violence—towards the Meitei fisherfolk of Loktak Lake and their fragile ecologies—onto the Manipuri state as well as the Indian state, which thrusts its developmental projects through the brute power of its armed forces. But with *Phum Shang*, we not only witness a documentation of this violence, but also see how certain vulnerable geologies like the phumdis open up other ways of inhabiting a fragile, damaged place through the act of suturing land.

Similarly, Sanjay Kak's *In the Forest Hangs a Bridge* (1998) documents the building of a 1,000ft-long suspension bridge, held together by cane and bamboo, across the Siang Valley in Arunachal Pradesh. It not only captures the Adi tribe's maintenance and repair of the bridge, but thinks of the locatedness of the camera in a suspended fragile bridge, the politics and poetics of weaving

cane and bamboo, and how might it shape or offer newer ways of imagining cinematic montage (like the suturing offered by phumdis). Paban Kumar's work, alongside other films on the ecologies of the Northeast, like Kak's, could thereby clarify how we imagine the peripheral or marginal (region) as a simultaneous entanglement of geologic conditions as well as climatic and political precariousness. This entanglement might also allow us to think of cinema as a situated, environmental craft, engaging with various cosmological inhabitations of lands.

MUD AND INSCRIPTION

Halfway into *What the Fields Remember*, Subasri Krishnan interviews Abdul Khayer, a middle-aged Bengali Muslim, who recounts the horrors he endured during the Nellie massacre. In a detailed recollection of what transpired on that fateful day, one notices a certain environmental tenor. Khayer hid in ponds, ran across fields, pretended to be a corpse floating in the river, fought to save his sons by the riverbank, only to later give his sons away to the lord of the river. The testimonies that string up the film, of Khayer and others, narrate the horrors in relation to the landscape in which they occurred. The film is full of instances where interviewees continually point to an elsewhere—figuratively and metaphorically. Khayer points straight to the riverbank, which remains unseen outside the frame, recollecting what happened there decades ago. Ruma, another survivor, points to an out-of-frame mango tree, both as the site of an idyllic childhood and genocidal violence. History is thus traced onto the milieu, the locations and topographies where something was gone, went lost or missing, as if to redirect us to sites where histories may reside (Thi, 2012). With this continuous cartographic impulse to point elsewhere, Krishnan's subjects urge us to think of landscapes as archives, where traces of violence can be sought in the environment (Tavares, 2014). This archival imaginary requires that land serve both as an inscribable substrate to register marks, traces and objects, and to preserve these traces, at least semi-permanently.

Kathryn Hayles argues that to count as an inscription technology, a device must initiate material changes that can be treated as marks, which might later be interpreted according to a given framework (Jue, 2020: 76). Film theory, too, has its basis in the camera's ability to record, preserve and transmit traces (Amad, 2010). More pertinently, film theory has also engaged with the landscape as an archive. Gilles Deleuze speaks of the stratigraphic image which, like a geological formation, captures or enunciates multiple temporalities held within its frame (1989: 243–44; Conley, 2010: 193–210). Deleuze borrows from the imaginaries of archaeology or stratigraphy—from the ability of land to coalesce, settle and form stratigraphic layers that might be read as different markers of time. His chosen example is the desert, where he talks of the landscape's ability to coalesce sand (and other objects) over long time frames, like stratigraphic layers. Taking off from this concept of the stratigraphic image and cinema's ability to record multiple temporalities, I ask: What might be our archival imaginaries of landscape-based cinema if we start thinking from lands that are fluid, often proximate to water—continuously shifting, withering and regenerating in time. What if this land does not lend itself to a solid, layered stratigraphic imaginary? How do the deltaic alluvial geologies of Barak Valley interface with the geopolitics of Assam's violent political histories and their suppression?

Early on in *What the Fields Remember*, Sirajuddin Ahmed, one of Krishnan's interviewees, reminisces that, unlike human history marked by violent upheavals, the river is a place of quietude and unchanging earthly temporalities. And yet, the deltaic milieu and the river that Krishnan films is a tempestuous milieu. The alluvial soil, so characteristic of the film's textural brownness, is antithetical to preservation. The river ebbs and flows, deposits silt which is then vehemently swept away in seasonal floods (Ministry of Water Resources, 2014: 15–18). The soil's origins and circulatory flows are tethered to the life-cycles of the river, moving and shifting in time. The alluvial banks are fragile pieces of land, weathering with water. With humidity, this fertile soil is the cornerstone of agriculture in the region, which Krishnan shows with abundant pastoral images of fields. These alluvial soils are eutrophic—fertile, furiously evolving in time (O'Dair, 2015: 154; Yates, 2015: 183). The deltaic Barak Valley, then, is anti-archival by nature, prone to entropic decay. The mud and clay of its landscape cannot retain or preserve long durée traces, even if they can inscribe them. Everything is either buried under layers of silt deposits, carried away by the river, or rewilded over with vegetal abundance. What is left in its stead is a landscape estranged from the milieu of that turbulent day in 1983.

It is this estrangement from the past which Krishnan highlights by situating the interviews of her subjects in these bucolic landscapes of the present. As Krishnan interviews Abdul Khayer, she frames him in a stable mid-close-up—a typical vox-populi setup—against panoramic shots of charred, empty ponds, a river bank with muddy waters, or empty stretches, or fields. Krishnan thereby trains her camera on a landscape inscribed with the present—with fertile soil and over-abundant nature—but nothing points to the visible remainders of the past. Remembrance of a traumatic past, therefore, has to be cinematically performed, resurrected in the present. The film juxtaposes shots of empty bucolic landscapes, often framed as vistas or panoramas, serially against close-ups of archival images from the past, such as personal photographs of those lost and forgotten, or folk songs sung by local Bengali Muslims (framed against the river banks), and intertitles or subtitles layering historical facts over the image. Since these titles articulate a disembodied feeling, a lack of materiality, Krishnan also layers her interviews over these landscapes, as if to give body to an untraceable trauma. This overlaying of interviews, or the spoken word, registers the breath, pauses and vocal articulations of Bengali Muslim survivors and witnesses, situating them against an oblivious landscape (Abrams, 1997). The anti-archivability of the landscape is most concretely exemplified when Krishnan intercuts between an aged Ahmed recollecting his trauma and agony by the pristine riverbank and an old photo of him touching a pile of human skulls strewn across an open field—possibly the last remains of his family. *What the Fields Remember* thus proposes a filmic imaginary that emerges from the muddied milieu of the deltaic Barak Valley. The film compensates, as if for the forgetful, anti-archivability of the humid, alluvial landscape prone to weathering, mutation and growth.[2] In a milieu where nothing is permanent and memory has to be performed cinematically, it is fitting that the only stable testament to the Nellie massacre is a memorial plaque established as recently as 2011. Made of granite, its materiality is not lost on anyone. Stone survives time, even as the letters on it weather and fade. The camera lingers on this plaque towards the beginning and end of the film, bracketing the fragile deltaic condition of forgetful fields with the permanent solidity of stone.

CONCLUSION

In his work on cartography, map-making and nation-formation, Thongchai Winichakul formulated what he called the 'geo-body' of the nation (1994). The geo-body is the literal landmass, along with its inhabitants who have to be sutured into the nation to form a continuous unified whole. Regional thinking or regions appear, then, as limbs, organs or parts of this body; yet, they are also liquid enough to extend into other bodies with ease. My essay asks: What if we understood the geo of the geo-body ecologically, think how land and its configurations shape our spatial imagination of the region? The paper has consequently tried to outline this imagination of the geo as situated between geoaesthetics (how land shapes our perceptual and aesthetic regimes) and geopolitics (the domain of national, regional and local politics). I have focused on cinemas situated in the Northeast (not of/from the Northeast necessarily) and their mediations of space. Our contemporary condition is marked profoundly by our ecological entanglements. This paper is not one of climate trauma merely, where we think both on the trauma inflicted on natural systems and also how climate adds to pre-existing social traumas, but think at the very fundamental level how cultural, technological and social milieus are shaped in relation to the environments that surround us. If cinema studies have recently focused on the materialities that shape our mediatic practice, our dependence on rare earth minerals, to streaming and its energy resource intensity, etc. (Bozak, 2012), my work here tries to focus on how our environments shape our aesthetic, poetic and representational practices. I am not interested only in how cultural practices imagine and shape our relationship with nature, often coding nature as pristine, untouched, ready-to-be-exploited as a standing reserve (Heidegger, 1977). I am deeply interested in how aesthetic, representational codes are materially governed by and respond to their environmental situatedness. I also study how environmental poetics speak to discourses of history, violence and dispossession affecting people and matter, attentive to their respective precarities. At a time when contestations around land and nationhood occupy our political horizons, this paper focuses on the vulnerable precarious populations who occupy, inhabit and speak from land at the margins. In turning to the Northeast, I try here to overcome its delimitation between the abstract scales of the national

and regional, attending instead to its felt, real sense of environmental precarities, and traumatic histories of genocide and extraction.

◆

NOTES

1. One ought to highlight the fact here that land does actually move all the time, in the realm of planetary tectonics, and so on. But this perception of land movement is beyond our human experience of land, which appears relatively stable and sturdy, thus throwing up similar cultural imaginaries.

2. My concern with how alluvial soils are anti-archival in nature borrows from emerging discourses in geophysiology (that think about the rapid movement of alluvial lands) and also tropical archeology (that think of how tropical climates are antithetical to preservation). See 'Alluvial Soils', *Science Direct Topics*, 2012. https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/agricultural-and-biological-sciences/alluvial-soils. While I don't directly transpose such transdisciplinary concerns in my work, they do inform my thinking on environmental mediation at large. While the lack of geological archivability is eminent in Subasri Krishnan's work, such entanglements around alluvial soils and genocidal violence have also shaped quite a few South East Asian artists' work. They include Nguyen Trinh Thi's *Landscape #1* series (2012), Rithy Panh's *Missing Picture* (2019) (and a larger Cambodian cultural investment in the Killing Fields of Phnom Penh) and Thao Nguyen Phan's *Becoming Alluvial* (2019).

REFERENCES

Abrams, David. 1997. *Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than Human World.* New York: Vintage Books.

Amad, Paula. 2010. *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday, and Albert Kahn's Archives de la Planète.* New York: Columbia University Press.

Baruah, Sanjib. 2020. *In the Name of the Nation: India and its Northeast.* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

Bhattacharya, Neeladri and Joy L. K. Pachuau (eds.). 2019. *Landscape, Culture, and Belonging: Writing the History of Northeast India.* New Delhi: Cambridge University Press.

Bruno, Guiliana. 2018. *Atlas of Emotions: Journeys of Art, Architecture and Film.* London: Verso.

Bozak, Cristina. 2012. *The Cinematic Footprint: Lights, Camera, Natural Resources.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Casetti, Francesco. 2011. 'Sutured Reality: Film, from Photographic to Digital', *October Magazine*, 138, Fall: 95–106.

Chang, Alenda Y. 2020. *Playing Nature: Ecology in Video Games.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.

Chu, Kiu-Wai. 2017. 'Ecocinema', in Krin Gabbard (ed.), *Oxford Bibliographies in Cinema and Media Studies.* Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1–22.

Conley, Tom. 2010. 'The Strategist and the Stratigrapher', in D. N. Rodowick (ed.), *Afterimages of Gilles Deleuze's Film Philosophy.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 193–210.

———. 2007. *Cartographic Cinema.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, Gilles. 1989. *Cinema 2: The Time Image.* Trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Dowerah, Swikrita and Debarshi Prasad Nath. 2019. 'Cinematic Landscapes of Northeast India through an Ecocritical Lens', *Asian Cinema*, 30 (2), October: 205–18.

Hardy, Kathryn C. 2015. 'Constituting a Diffuse Region: Cartographies of Mass-Mediated Bhojpuri Belonging', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 6 (2), 1 July: 145–64.

Heath, Stephen. 1981. 'Suture'. *Questions of Cinema.* London: MacMillan Publishers: 76–113.

Heidegger, Martin. 1977. *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays.* Trans. by William Lovitt. New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc.

Hui, Yuk. 2017. 'Cosmotechnics as Cosmopolitics', *E-flux Journal*, 86. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/161887/cosmotechnics-as-cosmopolitics/.

Jaikumar, Priya. 2019. *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space.* Durham: Duke University Press.

Jue, Melody. 2020. *Wild Blue Media: Thinking through Seawater.* Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Kikon, Dolly. 2019. *Living with Oil and Coal: Resource Politics and Militarization in Northeast India.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Lavin, Sophie Cristman and E. Ann Kaplan. 2017. 'The Climate of Ecocinema', *Oxford Research Encylopaedia of Communication.* Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1–39.

Manimala, Asem Chanu. 2018. 'Water Lives in Loktak', *Pangsau: Re-articulating India's North-East,* 13 June. https://pangsau.com/2018/06/13/the-struggles-of-the-lake-people-in-loktak/#comments.

———. 2015. 'Wind, "Phum" and Life on the Loktak Lake: A Photo Essay', *Economic and Political Weekly Engage*, 5 June: 7–8. https://www.epw.in/engage/article/wind-phum-and-life-loktak-lake-photo-essay.

Miller, J. Hillis. 2013. 'Ecotechnics', in Tom Cohen (ed.), *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change.* London: Open Humanities Press.

Ministry of Water Resources, Government of India. 2014. 'Barak and Others Basin'. March. https://indiawris.gov.in/downloads/Barak%20and%20Others%20Basin.pdf

Nag, Sajal (ed.). 2016. *Playing with Nature: History and Politics of Environment in North-East India.* New Delhi: Manohar.

Nichols, Bill. 1991. *Representing Reality.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

O' Dair, Sharon. 2015. 'Muddy Thinking', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (eds.), *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Mud, Fire, Air and Water.* Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press: 134–57.

Rajkhowa, Gaurav. 2015. 'Coming Back to Life: Jyotiprasad's Joymoti and Nationalist Politics in Assam, 1890s–1940s', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 6 (2), 1 July: 107–25.

Renov, Michael (ed.). 1993. 'Introduction: The Truth about Non-Fiction.' *Theorizing Documentary*. New York and London: Routledge: 1–11.

Rust, Stephen, Salma Monani and Sean Cubitt (eds.). 2013. *Ecocinema Theory and Practice*. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.

Srinivas, S. V. 2015. 'Region in Focus', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies,* 6 (2), 1 July: vii–ix.

Tavares, Paolo. 2014. 'Murky Evidence', *Cabinet*, 43 (special issue Forensics), 101–5.

Thi, Nguy'n Trinh. 2012. 'Landscape Series #1 (2013)', Nguy'n Trinh Thi (blog), 29 September 2012. https://nguyentrinhthi.wordpress.com/2012/09/29/landscape-series-1/.

Walker, Janet. 2015. 'Projecting Sea Level Rise: Documentary Film and Other Geolocative Technologies', in Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell: 61–85.

Willoquet-Maricondi, Paula. 2010. *Framing the World: Explorations in Ecocriticism and Film.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Winichakul, Thongchai. 1994. *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation.* Honolulu: Honolulu University of Hawai'i Press.

Yates, Julian. 2015. 'Wet', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Lowell Duckert (eds.), *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Mud, Fire, Air and Water*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press: 183–208.

◆◆

A CHANGE OF ADDRESS WITH *FILMFARE MIDDLE EAST*

SAMHITA SUNYA

Prior to the Dubai-based Danube group's relaunch of *Filmfare Middle East* in 2018, chairman Rizwan Sajan stated, '[*Filmfare*] is a cult brand and holds a huge readership among its target audience. That's the main reason that motivated me to relaunch the brand in the Middle East…. I hope we can keep the old essence of the magazine' (Dhal, 2018). Established in 1952, *Filmfare* magazine has indeed remained an institution, in many senses—as a glossy print publication that has enjoyed an energetic, popular following for decades, and as the engine and namesake of the well-known *Filmfare Awards*, established in 1954 as a major annual industry event.

Notably, *Filmfare Middle East* brands itself as the only cinema magazine in the Middle East, and as the 'only Asian monthly magazine in the region' that caters to 'Asians within the white collar industry'.[1] On the one hand, a history of popular print publications like *Filmfare* may certainly lend itself to classic studies of nation-building through the consolidation of print media publics, as theorised in Benedict Anderson's seminal *Imagined Communities* (1983). On the other, the unwieldy, prolific circulation of *Filmfare* among diasporic and overseas audiences remains particularly ripe for an analysis of the production of media industries and their publics as simultaneous processes of globalisation and vernacularisation (Mini, 2021; forthcoming), in their reciprocal reorganisation alongside shifts in global flows of labour and capital.

To this end, I examine the case of *Filmfare Middle East*, as both media object and media event. Published out of Dubai, *Filmfare Middle East* has hosted lavish events in the Emirates as well as Oman, and prominently features film stars and celebrities

in substance and in print not only from the Bombay industry, but also from Middle Eastern, south Indian and Pakistani contexts. By scrutinising the publicity surrounding *Filmfare Middle East*'s launch and relaunch, the regional edition's structure, and the wider contexts of its release (that in fact coincided with the publication of a Hindi-language edition of the magazine around the same time), I highlight an older history of the magazine's circulation among diasporic South Asians. At the same time I note that its contemporary avatars unfold in step with a distinctly neoliberal movement of global capital, reification of class hierarchies, and proliferation of image- and brand-driven transnational influencers and elites *as* flexible icons of national culture(s).

In what follows, I juxtapose invocations of *Filmfare* in two literary anecdotes that attest to the magazine's overseas circulation in earlier periods, to the much more contemporary publicity and self-presentation of *Filmfare Middle East*. This unfolds as an endeavour to scratch the surface of *Filmfare*'s longer history of circulation, cultural significance and aspirational relationship to (trans)national citizenship among a South Asian diaspora. Rather than offering a comprehensive or even representative account of *Filmfare* and/or its diasporic circuits, I conclude with a reflection on the conditions and stakes underlying the launch of *Filmfare Middle East* as the magazine's first significant regional edition, almost six decades after its initial founding.

MATERIAL OBJECTS AND IMAGINED COMMUNITIES: *FILMFARE* IN THE DIASPORA

Film magazines have constituted a rich set of archives and paratexts for scholars of South Asian media. They have figured as primary documents in endeavours to track histories of film journalism, reception, stardom, gossip and public debates over individual films, and over cinema and media, more generally (Basu, 2018; Bhatt, 2019; D. Mukherjee, 2013; M. Mukherjee, 2020; Siddique, 2019; Wani, 2016). Even in an essay that explores the 1970's emergence of the magazine *Stardust*, specifically, Rachel Dwyer is hardly alone in noting that the stature of *Filmfare* was by then practically self-evident, as the glossy English-language magazine was well-known for its colour photos, journalistic quality and high production values (2008). As Anustup Basu writes in an article

that turns to *Filmfare* in order to track Bengali cinema's relation to the region, nation and world between 1955 and 1965, *Filmfare* was:

the preeminent mainstream cinema periodical in India…[that] acted as the self-appointed arbiter between the state, the industry, and the public (…) [f]rom [a] cosmopolitan Bombay perspective [that] sought to editorialize the random courses of Indian cinema into a national axiomatic (2018: 141–43).

Established shortly after Independence in 1952 by the Times group of *The Times of India* newspaper, *Filmfare* went on to host an eponymous awards ceremony as an annual Bombay-industry event just two years later—the same year in which the government of India also instituted the National Film Awards. To this day, *Filmfare* is among a handful of older magazines that has remained in business through a boom-and-bust cycle that first saw an 'uncontainable' expansion of film magazines between the 1950s and 1990s, followed by their precipitous contraction (Mohamed, 2019). Thus, the founding and re-founding of *Filmfare Middle East* in the early 2000s—alongside the magazine's launch of a Hindi-language edition—occasions an exploration of the magazine's embeddedness in, and responses to, global tectonic shifts in print journalism, cinema, and (new) media industries in a digital era. Additionally, any foray into *Filmfare*'s overseas readership points to the largely uncharted waters of a longer account of the magazine's circulation—alongside that of Indian films—among diasporic and non-diasporic audiences, particularly throughout an Indian Ocean world scaffolded by (post) colonial, 20th-century networks of trade, labour and migration across South Asia, the Middle East, East Africa and South East Asia.

Anecdotal accounts of *Filmfare*'s circulation among diasporic South Asian communities surface in literary sources, both fiction and non-fiction. While there is little by way of facts and figures in these literary accounts, in terms of earnings or numbers of copies sold, they nonetheless provide glimpses into the material landscapes as well as affective dimensions of the shops, homes, hands and aspirations through which *Filmfare* was bought, sold and read abroad. Ashraf Aziz, who grew up in the 1950s and 1960s in a family descended from South Asian bonded labourers sent to East

Africa by the British during World Wars I and II, delivers a lyrical, poignant reflection of his memories of Hindi film/songs across generations and geographies. Broadcast as a Hindi–Urdu feature for Voice of America in 2000, Aziz's memoir was later transcribed and published in a special issue of the Hindi literary journal *Jalsa* dedicated to *Nirvaasan* (Exile) (2011). A particularly poignant emphasis throughout Aziz's memoir is on the extent to which his elder brother Masood's impassioned love for Hindi film/songs was steeped in a deep awareness of their availability to the common man as fodder for profound critical thought, both existential and ethical in nature (Sunya, 2017). Aziz notes:

My brother […] would say that heavy books were the purview of the mullahs and priests, of the elites. His medium of choice was that of the illustrated periodical, read by common people—*Life, Time, Illustrated Weekly of India*, *Filmfare*, *filmindia*, etc. For him, this itself was literature. He reserved the highest status for Hindustani film magazines. Whenever his friends would come to meet him, he would give them a magazine and say, 'This is *vaqt* (Time), this is *zindagii* (Life), and this is *thhaharii jhalak* (*Look*), you choose one.' In his view, the talking, singing, dancing world of Hindustani films was the highest form of art in the whole world… (2011; translation mine).

For Aziz, memories of Hindi film/songs in East Africa are inextricable from the global wars' ripple effects on the political economy of various commodities—e.g., sisal, a natural fibre grown in East Africa for making rope, whose value soared during the Korean War. In retrospect, Aziz recalls that for Masood, the abstractions and seductions of Hindi film/songs were so dear to his heart and world that they utterly consumed him. For Masood, even the tragedy of Partition, as witnessed from East Africa, crystallised in its deplorable effects on film/music, as a milieu of artists, composers and directors were torn asunder. The horrors of other conflicts, in contrast, did not register for him to the same extent:

Faraway, the Korean War was taking place. As a result, the price of sisal had increased quite a bit. It started to become known as the thread of gold. My brother would say that as long as the war was under way, our own affairs would be fine. He was unconcerned

about those who were injured and those who were killed in the conflict. He was also unaware of the fact that right next door in Kenya, the movement towards independence had begun with the Mau Mau Uprising. When he would be speaking, it would be with an eye towards *Filmfare*, which was, for him, the good life. From Januwala's store, he purchased a *Filmfare* magazine that had some creases in it. Over and over again he attempted to remove these creases, and spewing quite a bit of vitriol upon Januwala, he would say that Januwala does not uphold the honour of film magazines. The wrinkle of each page was evidence of Januwala's tyranny. The first Filmfare Award went to Naushad, the music director of *Baiju Bawra*, for the film's renowned song 'Tuu gangaa kii mauj main jamunaa kii dhaaraa' [You are a wave of the Ganga, I, a current of the Jamuna] […]

My brother was steeped in deep sorrow. He would say, 'Without a doubt *Baiju Bawra*'s songs are great. They're composed in ragas, but the award should have gone to C. Ramachandra for *Anarkali*—the musician who with the flame of jazz music ignited the brightness of our music in the song 'aanaa merii jaan, merii jaan sande ke sande' ['Come my darling, my darling, Sunday after Sunday']. In the end he surmised, 'There is little agreement between life and justice. Our purpose of living is that we may give each other the strength to understand the injustices of this existence' (Aziz, 2011; translation mine).

This passage in Aziz's memoir highlights the extent to which *Filmfare*, alongside Hindi films and their songs, constituted an exceptional, tangible resource for a second-generation diasporic subject like Masood, for contemplating and expressing existential questions of art, life and justice. Even Aziz's very critical awareness of the limits of his brother's obsession remains shaped by his own memories of popular forms—of Hindi films, songs and magazines—that connected him to layered, multilingual histories of empire, labour and migration as he came of age in East Africa.

The affective descriptions of Masood's anguish over the 'tyranny' of the shopkeeper who dared violate the magazine's 'honour' with creases, casts the magazine as a feminine, romantic object for possession and protection. While *Filmfare* was clearly read not just by

men within and outside of India, it was associated—and cherished—for its images of female stars, in particular. Journalist Khalid Mohamed notes that while '[t]hat market element of "impulsive" buying [film magazines] from the stalls is extinct,' still, '[q]uite curiously, down the decades research teams of film magazines have indicated that a female star on the cover is snapped up way faster than those of the heroes' (2019). Mohamed thus observes that, on the one hand, the 'impulsive' purchase of film magazines from a stall—or a shop such as that of Januwala's in Aziz's memoir—has been replaced by postal (if not digital) subscriptions. On the other hand, however, Mohamed's characterisation of a desire for older film magazines as cherished objects of nostalgia curiously mirrors the very affective relationship to *Filmfare* that Aziz recalls. While the current nostalgia for celluloid-era memorabilia is, among other factors, informed by shifts in cinematic form and circulation that mark the former as belonging to a bygone era, it parallels another kind of nostalgia in Aziz's memoir for the erstwhile home of the subcontinent that his parents and grandparents had left behind. This latter nostalgia thoroughly infuses Aziz's recollections of the extent to which popular films, songs and magazines mediated their experiences as second-generation, upwardly-mobile diasporic subjects as they came of age in East Africa, all through the 1950s and 1960s.

Set roughly one decade later and published in a 1978 collection, UK-based émigré Indian writer and leftist activist Farrukh Dhondy's short story 'Salt on a Snake's Tale' weaves in a set of references to Hindi films and *Filmfare* as well as Bruce Lee's martial arts films. Together, the *filmi* references in Dhondy's story frame the young Bangladeshi protagonist Jolil's fantasies of an underdog masculinity (Srinivas, 2003), as he dreams of becoming a fighter–hero who can vanquish the omnipresent baddies of racialised violence faced by Black and brown working-class immigrants in London's Brick Lane borough:

> Tailoring made nimble but tired fingers. It turned your fingers into tools. Kung Fu converted them into weapons.
>
> These were thoughts his father wouldn't understand. In a movie called *The Black Dragon Revenges the Death of Bruce Lee*, the hero had plucked out the eyes of several villains and destroyed with similar cruelty the faces of others. There was a knack to it. You twisted your

palm in the faces of the enemy. Your hurricane hands had to be trained to lay low an army of fiends. Once he was good enough he'd get his photograph in the *Martial Arts* magazine, and in *Filmfare*, which his sister-in-law read. He'd be the first Bangladeshi martial arts hero, and his films would sell better than those of Rajesh Khanna, whom his sister-in-law adored, and then he could buy a white American car. But if he ever became famous, he wouldn't go and live in Malabar Hill in Bombay like the other film stars did. He'd use his powers to do other things, to right a lot of wrongs, to be a saint of the fighting world (Dhondy, 1978: 89).

These diasporic coming-of-age experiences of the fictional Jolil, like those of Aziz and his brother Masood, are mediated by a milieu of popular culture through which Jolil dwells upon questions of (in)justice that range from the deeply personal and everyday (e.g., violent White supremacist gangs) to the more abstract (e.g., wealth disparities exemplified by Bombay celebrities' lavish lifestyles). Jolil's reveries are propelled—and limited—by a youthfully hormonal set of fantasies (e.g., to become a top fighter and to thereby win his sister-in-law's fawning attentions). The story closes on a dark note, as the reader realises that Jolil has in fact acted out his fantasy with a small knife, in protecting himself and his father while fighting back against a skinhead whose gang attacks them. But as police cars pull up to their neighbourhood in the closing moments of the story, the weight of systemic, racialised and anti-immigrant violence—with which institutions of policing and surveillance are complicit—hangs heavily and ominously over the impossibility of deliverance by any sort of lone, Bruce Lee-esque, fighting hero.

In both Dhondy's short story and Aziz's memoir, *Filmfare* surfaces as a specific object (feminine, insightful, seductive, cherished) that—much like gramophone records—circulates as a cinematic talisman through the intimate spaces of homes prior to the ubiquity of television and VHS, and in an intimate relationship with a single reader at a time, who could peruse and contemplate the magazine's textual and pictorial content individually—less like gramophone records or even radio broadcasts. The primacy of the star-studded celluloid object remains a structuring force in both accounts, and the desire for film magazines—as well as gramophone records in the case of Aziz's memoir—are centrally propelled by this cinephilia.

Anderson's classic theorisation of the fundamental role that print culture plays in constituting the nation as an imagined community has been taken up by an early generation of scholars of Indian cinema who have emphasised the primacy of popular cinema—over and above print media—to nation-building in the Indian context, particularly in light of the lack of any common national language as well as the issue of literacy (Dass, 2015; Dwyer, 2008; Prasad, 2001; Rajadhyaksha, 2009; Virdi, 2003). As Dwyer writes:

> Indian cinema, more than any other media, whether newspapers or the novel (the print media which Benedict Anderson [1991] argues are one of the major prerequisites for imagining a national community), has mediated the imagination of the Indian nation through its extensive reach across the nation and the diaspora, and its consumption beyond the cinematic moment in other media, notably recorded music, radio, television, magazines, and so on (2008: 1).

While popular Indian cinema's role in nation-building in both domestic and diasporic contexts is hardly arguable, nation-building also does not exhaust the circuits of Indian films and audiences' engagements through affiliated media. To put this as a question more specific to *Filmfare*'s relationship to diaspora: What kinds of collectivities have been precipitated through *Filmfare*, in various locations, at various historical junctures? In both Aziz's memoir and Dhondy's short story, for example, *Filmfare* is tightly bound to stardom and cinema as sites of negotiating racial, ethnic, class, gender—and, in the case of Aziz's memoir, multilingual—identities. In both these instances, *Filmfare*'s link—and that of Hindi popular films more broadly—to national identity remains somewhat tenuous.

Aziz's memoir is more explicit on this matter, purposefully using the term 'Hindustani' as an adjective for a cultural and linguistic milieu that was irreducible to either Hindi or Urdu, on the one hand; or to either India or Pakistan, on the other. Aziz's grandparents and parents migrated to East Africa from Sialkot in present-day Pakistan, in what was then British India prior to Independence/Partition. Thus, the national categories of either India or Pakistan are anachronistic, given that his family's departure from their erstwhile homeland preceded the establishment of either modern polity. In the case of Dhondy's short story, too,

the protagonist Jolil's family and community are working-class Bangladeshis. For Jolil, *Filmfare*'s universe was chiefly one of alternate possibilities where underdog heroes could overcome their oppressors, epitomised by not only Hindi films, but also the martial arts films of Bruce Lee. Thus, amidst the concrete violence meted out by gangs of White supremacists, Jolil and his Black classmate Errol bond over their shared, ardent admiration for Bruce Lee. Just as Jolil recognises the limits of actual film stars' class consciousness, so, too, does Aziz recognise the limits of the extent to which his brother Masood was consumed by the world of Hindi film/songs/*Filmfare*.

If anything at all emerges as the essence of *Filmfare* in these two diasporic accounts, it is popular Bombay cinema, rather than the national category of either India or Indian-ness. Indeed, *Filmfare* was known since its inception for its cosmopolitan coverage of not only popular Hindi cinema, but also Indian regional cinemas as well as other cinemas and stars world over (Basu, 2018). The diasporic invocations of *Filmfare* in Aziz's memoir and Dhondy's short story coincide with an era of film circulation through cinema halls and print circulation through local stalls, as the enterprise of popular Indian cinema was generally staked upon a masala form with mass appeal. The earlier glimpse of the magazine's diasporic routes through a memoir and short story, penned by diasporic writers, highlights the fact that its circulation among overseas South Asians is hardly a new phenomenon in and of itself.

FILMFARE MIDDLE EAST'S RE-IMAGINED COMMUNITIES

In characterising the shifts marked by the 'Bollywoodisation' of Hindi cinema since the 1990s—the decade in which it was granted industry status by the Indian government—Ashish Rajadhyaksha observes the transformation of a film industry into a culture industry (Prasad, 2003; Vasudevan, 2008). What marks the latter, he argues, is the unhinging of the nation from the state, as ethnonationalism becomes deterritorialised, and the diminished role of cinema itself within a Bollywood culture industry that encompasses everything from food to fashion to fitness. Others have additionally emphasised changes in production, exhibition and form, in terms of an increased segmentation of audiences through productions that cater to 'malltiplex' clientele (Goswami, 2016; Prasad, 2003; Rai, 2009). Indeed, if cinema was the essence of not only *Filmfare*,

but also a plethora of other magazines, then the diminishing importance of cinema in the ascendance of a much more voracious Bollywood culture industry since the 1990s, explains, in part, the film magazines' dramatic, coinciding drop-off (Mohamed, 2019). Having established its own (by then decades-old) awards ceremony as a highly anticipated media event, *Filmfare*'s stream of revenue had come to include deals with television channels and press outlets vying to cover the annual awards ceremony. Thus, despite a wider drop-off in the popularity of film magazines, *Filmfare* could remain afloat through this decline and eventually managed to change gears. Precisely along the lines of the shifts that Rajadhyaksha describes, Mohamed avers:

> There's been a twist in the plot since the turn of the millennium. Covers of high-glossy fashion magazines—Indian progeny of their international big daddies—are being way more hankered after by the Bollywood A-listers. In addition, exclusive destination wedding pictures are believed to fetch cushy sums for the movie couples…
>
> The subject of movies, itself, has been blindsided since the focus is infinitely dedicated to fashionware and lifestyles mores, complete with plush interiors of star homes, holiday vignettes and largely innocuous tete-a-tetes.
>
> This changeover of film print content has been inevitable, in sync with the norm established by Hollywood's megastars. Right down from Tom Cruise and Angelina Jolie to Idris [E]lba and Jennifer Lawrence on the eve of their just-about-to-premiere projects feature in exclusive chats and cover clicks for *Vogue*, *Elle* and *Vanity Fair*, to name three prime examples (2019).

The most drastic shift, in this regard, is perhaps that of *Filmfare*'s transition in its address, from a film magazine addressed to middle-class cinegoers, to a Bollywood lifestyle magazine for elite, luxury-brand-conscious consumers.

The launch of the Dubai-based *Filmfare Middle East* edition occasions an opportunity to explore the specificity of the Gulf's contemporary relationship to South Asia, South Asian diasporic citizens and South Asian media. Saffron Media Works launched

Filmfare Middle East in 2010, although the magazine, along with the company's other magazines that included a Middle East edition of the women's bi-monthly *Femina*, abruptly shut down under spurious circumstances in 2017, when the owners slipped out of the country and left several employees and vendors high and dry, to whom they owed substantial salaries and dues (Farooqui, 2017). In 2018, Danube chairman Rizwan Sajan led a relaunch, determined to 'keep the old essence of the magazine', as he remained confident in the success of such a long-standing 'cult brand' as *Filmfare* (Dhal, 2018).

What, exactly, is the 'old essence' of *Filmfare* to which Sajan refers? The 'About Us' section of the *Filmfare Middle East*'s website boasts:

> With a clear focus on films, fashion and lifestyle and our in-depth exclusive interviews with Hindi, Malayalam, Arab and Pakistani cinema, *FILMFARE Middle East is the only Asian monthly magazine in the region*. Catering predominantly to the the [*sic*] large Asian expatriate population in the UAE and the GCC, as well as a significant Arab population who love their Bollywood cinema and celebrities, *FILMFARE Middle East is read by everyone—from the celebrities themselves to the prominent Indians/Asians within the white-collar industry, creme de la creme of the Asian society, fashion designers and more* which is what makes *FILMFARE ME* a household name. *With Bollywood celebrities visiting the Middle East on an almost weekly basis, FILMFARE Middle East editorially covers all Bollywood red carpet events* with the celebrities, their premieres and screenings.[2]

The magazine extolls its Asian identity at the same time that its geography of Asia evidently does not include the Middle East as it proclaims itself to be 'the only Asian monthly magazine in the region'. 'Asian' may very well be a gloss for 'South Asian', as its intended 'Asian' stakeholders are specifically mentioned as fans of Hindi, Malayalam and Pakistani cinemas, alongside fans of Arab cinema. Just as its version of Asia excludes the Middle East/Gulf, so, too, does its version of 'everyone' skew unabashedly towards the 'prominent Indians/Asians within the white-collar industry' and 'crème de la crème of the Asian society'. In this declaration, the magazine openly cultivates a high-end, elite sector as its desired clientele, whose trickle-down influence is taken for granted with indifference, as a side-effect.

To better position an analysis of *Filmfare Middle East*'s self-presentation, I turn to scholars who have explored the contemporary nexus between citizenship, mobility and capital for South Asian expats in the Gulf. In the case of Dubai, specifically, anthropologist Neha Vora has keenly emphasised the role of non-citizen Indian elites in buttressing the state as an '"effect" of multiple sometimes contradictory, practices and narratives' (2011: 124). Through ethnographic interviews with elite Indian businessmen in Dubai, Vora calls into question several assumptions: that in the context of an illiberal state such as the UAE, the sharpest dichotomy is that of citizen versus non-citizen; that non-citizens in such an illiberal context are not free; and that non-citizens, as a major workforce, necessarily occupy a critical stance vis-à-vis the Emirati sheikhdoms. Instead, by examining Indian businessmen's consistent narratives about the 'freedom' they have in Dubai, she shows that caste and class privilege, on the one hand, and patriarchal, nationalist constructions of 'Indian' and 'Emirati', on the other, are embraced and reified by Indian elites in Dubai who, together with elite Emirati business partners, state institutions, and loopholes therein, benefit from the very neoliberal structures that exploit fellow Indian (and other) working-class non-citizens who comprise the majority of the population and workforce. Vora's emphasis on Indian businessmen's conservative ethno-nationalism—i.e., their pride in remaining unassimilated and distinct from Arabs and Emiratis as Indians in Dubai—squares with *Filmfare Middle East*'s similarly prideful characterisation of 'Asian' and 'Arab'/ 'Gulf' identities as mutually exclusive.

The question of citizenship that ensues from the 'state effect' of multiple, contradictory forces with which Vora engages through an ethnography of elite Indian businessmen in Dubai, is taken up through cinema by Ratheesh Radhakrishnan. Radhakrishnan tracks the Gulf's relationship to the material and discursive production of Kerala as a region, noting that popular Malayalam films have registered shifts in patterns of migration and remittances from the Gulf between the 1970s and the 2000s. He notes that the cinematic depiction of the Gulf in Malayalam cinema has moved from associations with smuggling and clandestine activities in the 1970s, to a dream destination for Malayalees to prosper and succeed in the 1980s, to, more recently, a space that more sharply distinguishes between the Malayalee who triumphs and becomes

a direct investor back home, versus the Malayalee who returns without having amassed such wealth, as a failure. 'At a time when the cultural boundaries are replacing national/regional boundaries,' Radhakrishnan concludes, 'those emigrants who go to the Gulf seeking jobs and are unable to hold the mantle of the "cultural Malayalee" are the abject citizens of the region' (2009).

Radhakrishnan's identification of a deterritorialised cultural nationalism, wherein citizenship is tightly bound up with capital, invokes not only Vora's ethnographic insights as well as Aihwa Ong's notion of 'flexible citizenship' (1999), but also Rajadhyaksha's characterisation of Bollywood as a neoliberal culture industry that emerged as a state-effect of multinational capital through the loosening of 'nation', as an ethno-cultural construction, from the 'state', as a set of institutions of territorial governance. The citizens that *Filmfare Middle East*'s 'About Us' hails are Gulf Arab citizens, on the one hand, and Asians whose *class* citizenship—as successful, mobile, influencers with spending power—enjoins them in a transnational federation that reifies their national–cultural identities, irrespective of territorial belonging. Thus, *Filmfare Middle East* produces a discursive form of gatekeeping—akin to the material gatekeeping of such institutions as the India Club in Dubai (Vora, 2011)—that welcomes 'prominent Indians/Asians within the white-collar industry' who, in embodying the desirable 'crème de la crème', *belong* in Dubai, *as* citizens of their respective national–cultural– ethnic (as well as privileged class and caste) identities: Asian, Indian, Pakistani, etc. Those who occupy the lower strata of working-class migrants remain unbelonging 'abject citizens' who embody failure not only in the Gulf, but also with respect to their deterritorialised national/regional identities that invoke the space of 'back home' (Radhakrishnan, 2009).

It is through such a deterritorialised citizenship contingent on class that Bollywood film star Shah Rukh Khan declares in a recent social media promo for Dubai tourism, 'Welcome to *my* Dubai… #BeMyGuest!'[3] Wearing a black hoodie, the star moves through activities of glamour and leisure—roaming immaculate souks, sky-diving, playing beach volleyball, strolling through glittering malls, visiting upscale restaurants—as fellow patrons become giddy upon recognising the film star in their midst. Shah Rukh Khan's invitation to #BeMyGuest in 'my Dubai' both claims his own belonging in

Dubai as an elite Indian citizen and extends this invitation to those who have already arrived, in a sense, in terms of their disposable income for indulging in such activities of luxury, of leisure. The Dubai that Shah Rukh Khan 'owns' is a Dubai whose citizenship is tied to purchasing power. As such, the video showcases a cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic, multinational segment of wealthy elites in Dubai, rather than making any clear dichotomy between Emirati citizens and non-Emirati non-citizens. Within such a club, Bollywood can brand Dubai as much as it can India or Bombay.[4] It was Shah Rukh Khan, as a superstar figurehead of this elite brand, who in fact announced Danube's 2018 relaunch of *Filmfare Middle East* at the 63rd Jio Filmfare Awards in Bombay.

Filmfare Middle East's website breathlessly describes its March 2018 relaunch as Dubai virtually outdoing itself, held at Bollywood Parks in Dubai (Ferrão, forthcoming):

> It couldn't have been grander than this! The Bollywood Parks in Dubai didn't just look like a magical place but also had the biggest names of Bollywood adding their shine to it. The relaunch of *Filmfare Middle East* was easily the glitziest night Dubai has seen in a long time (Gangwani, 2018).

Among the celebrities in attendance were Deepika Padukone, Karan Johar, Manish Malhotra, Dia Mirza, Sophie Choudry, Usha Uthup, Kalpana Iyer, Bappi Lahiri, Amaal and Arman Malik, Jackie Shroff, Jawed Shaikh, Sajjad Delafrooz, and Fawad Khan, who was awarded the title of 'Pakistan/India Icon'. The pan-(South) Asian nature of the event parallels the form of the *Filmfare Middle East* edition of the magazine, which includes sections dedicated to the coverage of 'Hindi, Malayalam, Arab, and Pakistani cinema'.[5]

Even in recent years, when tensions between India and Pakistan have flared, each country has jingoistically called for bans on the other's films and film stars (Chintamani, 2019; Pathak, 2019). In this sense, Dubai—and the pages of *Filmfare Middle East*—may initially seem to unfold as a space where such Indo–Pak tensions may productively slacken. Ultimately, however, this slackening just as easily affords an erosion of political engagement that only normalises status quo structures by leaving them unchallenged. As Vora notes in her ethnographic work, elite Indian businessmen's

official status as non-citizens of the Emirates serves as a convenient excuse for their abdication of any political responsibility of any kind—to challenge, for example, the structural exploitation of other fellow Indians and non-citizens by praxis, rather than law. Yet, since this undermines their own economic interests, there is little incentive to do so.

Reflecting on the relaunched magazine's tremendous success in its first year, founder Rizwan Sajan stated:

> After breaking the record of 1.3 billion dollars' turnover in 2018, we have been growing ever since and we credit this success to our fans and fraternity across the world. Our only strategy is reaching to [*sic*] the right people and keeping our engagement simple. We are thrilled to be associated with one of the biggest industries in the world which reaches out to audience[s] across borders and ethnicity.[6]

Sajan's remarks were occasioned by the anniversary of *Filmfare Middle East*'s relaunch, celebrated in a similarly lavish, star-studded event in Muscat, Oman, which featured an entourage of Bollywood and other South Asian film stars as well as Omani singer Haitham Mohammed Rafi. The singer's grandfather had named his son after Hindi film playback star Mohammed Rafi, whose concert he was attending in Abu Dhabi in the 1970s when he learned that his wife had given birth to a boy (Nair, 2017). Discovered by an Indian talent scout in Oman, the senior Mohammed Rafi began performing in Muscat, after which his young daughter Asma and son Haitham were eventually recruited as participants for singing competition reality shows on Indian channels Zee TV and Star Plus, respectively, by which the young girl and boy both shot to fame, with Haitham emerging as the winner of the latter's *Dil Hai Hindustani* in its first season (ibid.).

The story of Haitham Mohamed Rafi's naming and 'fame'-ing, extending back through at least two previous generations, emphasises the decades-long presence and popularity of Hindi film/songs in the Gulf, among other overseas locations. While this circulation, generally, of South Asian film/songs/popular culture has remained a constant in the Gulf at least since the 1970s (Sunya, forthcoming), I hope to have shown that the 2010 launch and 2018 relaunch of

Filmfare Middle East mark out key shifts in the material and discursive terrain of both cinema and 'culture', as claims to citizenship are increasingly deterritorialised and mediated through the mobility of capital, concentrated in the hands of a similarly mobile coterie of transnational elites. While the conditions of (non)belonging in the context of an illiberal state like Dubai seem particularly visible, they are hardly exceptional,[7] as Vora argues. Instead, they prod us to examine the ways in which the segmentations of class, caste, labour and capital restructure and reimagine communities and collectivities, such that one may consider the ways in which the domain of 'culture' may simultaneously mediate alternative formations of political praxes, where the bottom line is something far more egalitarian than merely accumulation.

◆

NOTES

1. See *Filmfare Middle East*. 2019. 'About Us.' https://filmfaremiddleeast.com/about-us/. Accessed on 3 September 2019.

2. Ibid.

3. See Visit Dubai. 2018. 'Come #BeMyGuest in Dubai—Shah Rukh Khan Invites You.' https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=07wMqpXn2gk. Accessed on 6 September 2019.

4. For its discussion of Shah Rukh Khan as an Indian minority-figure-turned-global-icon, see Sreya Mitra's 'The Question of Minority Citizenship'.

5. See *Filmfare Middle East*. 2019. 'About Us.' https://filmfaremiddleeast.com/about-us/. Accessed on 3 September 2019.

6. See Pinkvilla Desk. 2019. '*Filmfare Middle East* to Celebrate Magazine's First Anniversary', *Pinkvilla*. https://www.pinkvilla.com/entertainment/news/filmfare-middle-east-celebrate-magazines-first-anniversary-all-its-glory-and-glitz-omans-muscat-444689. Accessed on 19 March 2019.

7. Further highlighting the stakes of such exceptionalism vis-à-vis media representations, Dale Hudson analyses the material circumstances and the visualisations of Dubai in the film *City of Life* (dir: Ali F. Mostafa; 2009): 'More than a conflict zone, as the Middle East is often conceived, Dubai is a contact zone. *City of Life* acknowledges that Dubai is *neither free of* social inequities *nor defined by* them' (2020: 26).

REFERENCES

Anderson, Benedict. 1983. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on The Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

Aziz, Ashraf. 2011. 'Sigret, Sinema, Sahgal Aur Sharab (Memoir)', in Asad Zaidi (ed.), *Jalsa*: *Exile*, 2.

Basu, Anustup. 2018. 'Filmfare and the Question of Bengali Cinema (1955–65)', *South Asian History and Culture*, 9 (2): 141–58.

Bhatt, Olympia. 2019. 'Writing About Sound: The Early Talkie Film Periodicals of India', in Meghan Forbes (ed.), *International Perspectives on Publishing Platforms: Image, Object, Text*. London: Routledge: 48–51.

Chintamani, Gautam. 2019. 'Pakistan Bans Release of Indian Films in the Aftermath of Pulwama Attack', *Firstpost*. https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/pakistan-bans-release-of-indian-films-in-the-aftermath-of-pulwama-attack-what-are-they-going-to-watch-now-6163511.html. Accessed on 27 February 2019.

Dass, Manishita. 2015. *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dhal, Sharmila. 2018. 'Danube to Relaunch *Filmfare* in the Middle East Soon', *Gulf News*. https://gulfnews.com/uae/danube-to-relaunch-filmfare-in-the-middle-east-soon-1.2162402. Accessed on 24 January 2018.

Dhondy, Farrukh. 1978. *Come to Mecca and Other Stories*. London: Fontana.

Dwyer, Rachel. 2008. 'The Indian Film Magazine, *Stardust*', in Anandam P. Kavoori and Aswin Punathambekar (eds.), *Global Bollywood*. New York: New York University Press: 240–67.

Farooqui, Mazhar. 2017. 'Staff Left in the Lurch as Magazine Owners Flee Country'. https://gulfnews.com/uae/staff-left-in-the-lurch-as-magazine-owners-flee-country-1.1998365. Accessed on 6 June 2020.

Ferrão, R. Benedito. 2021 (Forthcoming). 'Reorienting a Theme: Bollywood Parks Dubai and Off-screen Filmic Imaginaries', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

Gangwani, Rahul. 2018. 'Deepika Padukone, Karan Johar, Fawad Khan and Many More Attend the Launch of *Filmfare Middle East*', *Filmfare.com*. https://www.filmfare.com/photos/deepika-padukone-karan-johar-fawad-khan-and-many-more-attend-the-launch-of-filmfare-middle-east-27365.html. Accessed on 31 March 2018.

Goswami, Amrita. 2016. '"New Bollywood" and the Emergence of a "Production House" Culture', *South Asian Popular Culture*, 14 (3): 185–97.

Hudson, Dale. 2020. 'Toward a Cinema of Contact Zones: Intersecting Globalizations, Dubai, and *City of Life*', *Afterimage*, 47 (4): 26-49.

Mini, Darshana Sreedhar. 2021 (Forthcoming). 'Satellites of Belonging: Televisual Infrastructures of the Gulf-Malayali', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

Mitra, Sreya. 2020. 'The Question of Minority Citizenship: Shah Rukh Khan as the "Global Indian"', in Avishek Ray and Ishita Banerjee-Dube (eds.), *Nation, Nationalism and the Public Sphere*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications India: 191–213.

Mohamed, Khalid. 2019. 'Filmindia to Blitz: The Inside Story & Spice of B'wood Magazines', *The Quint*. https://www.thequint.com/entertainment/bollywood/rare-vintage-bollywood-film-magazine-covers-articles. Accessed on 5 March 2019.

Mukherjee, Debashree. 2013. 'Notes on a Scandal: Writing Women's Film History Against an Absent Archive', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 4 (1): 9–30.

Mukherjee, Madhuja. 2020. 'To Speak or Not to Speak', in Laura Brueck, Jacob Smith and Neil Verma (eds.), *Indian Sound Cultures, Indian Sound Citizenship*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press: 268–98.

Nair, Shruthi. 2017. 'A Tale of Oman's Mohammed Rafi Family', *Times of Oman*. https://timesofoman.com/article/101886/HI/Events/A-Tale-of-Omans-Mohammed-Rafi-Family. Accessed on 1 February 2017.

Ong, Aihwa. 1999. *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Pathak, Vedanshi. 2019. 'All Pakistani Artists Banned from the Indian Film Industry', *Filmfare.com*. https://www.filmfare.com/news/bollywood/all-pakistani-artists-banned-from-the-indian-film-industry-32585.html. Accessed on 18 February 2019.

Prasad, M. Madhava. 2003. 'This Thing Called Bollywood', *India Seminar Online*. http://www.india-seminar.com/2003/525/525%20madhava%20prasad.htm. Accessed on 3 December 2019.

———. 2001. *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh. 2009. 'The Gulf in the Imagination: Migration, Malayalam Cinema and Regional Identity', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 43 (2): 217–45.

Rai, Amit S. 2009. *Untimely Bollywood: Globalization and India's New Media Assemblage*. First Edition. Durham: Duke University Press Books.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 2009. *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Siddique, Salma. 2019. 'Archive Filmaria: Cinema, Curation, and Contagion', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 39 (1): 196–211.

Srinivas, S. V. 2003. 'Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B Circuit', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4 (1): 40–62.

Sunya, Samhita. 2021 (Forthcoming). 'Changing Winds: Oman TV, Indian (Ocean) Films and Media Piracy in the 1980s', *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication*.

———. 2017. 'Moving Toward Prem Nagar: An Intimate Genealogy of the "City of Love" and the Lyrical Worlds of Hindustani Film Songs', *positions: asia critique*, 25 (1): 51–99.

Vasudevan, Ravi. 2008. 'The Meanings of 'Bollywood', in Rachel Dwyer and Jerry Pinto (eds.), *Beyond the Boundaries of Bollywood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 3–29.

Virdi, Jyotika. 2003. *The Cinematic ImagiNation: Indian Popular Films as Social History*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Vora, Neha. 2011. 'Unofficial Citizens: Indian Entrepreneurs and the State-Effect in Dubai, United Arab Emirates', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 79 (1): 122–39.

Wani, Aarti. 2016. *Fantasy of Modernity: Romantic Love in Bombay Cinema of the 1950s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

❖❖

THE ABSENT FULLNESS OF 'NOT-YET-CINEMA'

MOHAMED
SHAFEEQ
KARINKURAYIL

In a recently released Malayalam film, *Halal Love Story* (dir: Zakariya; 2020; hereafter *HLS*), the local office bearer of a Muslim cultural organisation, exasperated by the (religiously) forbidden sights that populate cinema, wonders if there could ever be a film they too would be able to watch. Set in the early 2000s, the film alludes to the far more modest Home Cinema movement in northern Kerala, where the newly arrived compact disc technology and proliferating cable TV channels, along with the older networks of local video rental shops, gave rise to a host of locally made films greatly concerned with the experiences of Gulf migration. Spearheaded by a school teacher, Salam Kodiyathur, this cinema had as its stated objective the purification of the senses from the corruption of mainstream cinema, and addressed itself to the numerically large Muslim population of the region on the plank of 'Islamic cinema'. Elsewhere, I have shown how Home Cinema, in its assumed objective of creating an ethical subject, adopted the aesthetic of middlebrow cinema in which the local/migrant experience became a 'screened possibility'. While the middlebrow aesthetic aspired to a realistic depiction of the subject, the alternative possibilities of these lives seeped through 'in amateur acting skills, in their choice of attractions like the kitchen orchestra, and through its confusion in dialogues of dialects between a standard Malayalam and that of south Malabar…' (Karinkurayil, 2019: 47).

Much of the plot of *HLS* revolves around issues that can be directly linked to practices of the Home Cinema movement—the assumed religious prohibition on depicting the private, and negotiating this ban; the employment of actors with questionable

A shot from *Halal Love Story*

acting skills; the impossibility of crowd management in familiar settings, etc. What was also characteristic of Home Cinema was the very poor technology that was in use, and the tentative nature of the entire undertaking, given the frugal means, especially when the films were shot amongst migrants in the Gulf countries, given that migrants were not professional actors and had to attend to their regular jobs.

The success of the Home Cinema movement, as a familiar feature of popular culture in north Kerala, has often been explained in mainstream media in terms of the former being representative of migrant lives, creating a previously uncaptured audience segment because of the Islamic ethos of representation, and better permeability because of the direct-to-home marketing technique that bypasses the theatre circuit. The success of HCM is despite its overall poor quality and the presence of a formidable organised industry with far more attractive fare. As to the question of why cinema at all, the answers are along the lines of how youth is being corrupted by mainstream cinema, and how a cinema with an Islamic ethos can discipline our senses. Interestingly, while the argument seems to be converting filmgoers to a new ethic of seeing, Home Cinema delivered a new audience to cinema, and this needs to be explained beyond modes of representation and circulation.

HLS presents us the problem. The local Islamist in *HLS* desires a film that both his family and he may watch. It is a simple desire, which recognises the enchantment of cinema and the wish to partake

in it without losing one's moorings. It is not a question of the utility of a new technology towards an eternal truth; rather, the premise of the argument is the bewitching power of the very technology and the desire to partake of its magic. The desire here is the desire to see rather than say. It is also, at the same time, a grievance that one has been denied sight of all this while. *HLS* is about the making of such a film, the various episodes of varied emotions that occasion the many scenes in the film, and ultimately, the very magic of cinema.

What I wish to explore in this paper is the nature of the desire for cinema and its implication for what is called cinematic populism. While Home Cinema may be considered an example of amateur cinema, and *HLS* as cinema proper made within the industry, the primary site of this investigation in what follows does not yet figure as cinema proper. In these categorisations, I am simply following how these forms are referred to in general. As such, no one confuses a DIY video for cinema. However, it is important to retain the reference to cinema in acknowledgement of the cinematic that has pervaded every frame as cinema was ancillarised into numerous forms and dimensions (Rajadhyaksha, 2003). Cinema thereby becomes a frame of reference necessary to comprehend the glamour of even that which is not called cinema. And yet, I have called it 'not-yet-cinema', conscious of the fact that the phrase suggests a lack, and also a teleology. My use of the term, however, is to signal my avoidance of reading these videos as some kind of subaltern resistance to the mainstream. I would rather register these videos as aspirations to a world of greater possibilities. And, as such, I would also see in them imitations of what is assumed to be a universally intelligible language—to use Miriam Hansen's choice of metaphors, 'Babylon' rather than 'Babel' (1991). But, at the same time, there are moments when the particularity that erupts in the performance of the universal is allowed a life of its own, as a possibility well within us but just discovered, which broadens the horizon of the imaginable. Being caught in this suspension, perched between universality and particularity, I turn to discussing inadequacy/failure/mistake as an avenue of participation and mobilisation.

THE RISKY POSSIBLE

The lockdown period saw an efflorescence of popular creativity. Several of my cousins started their own YouTube channels.

Some of them showcased their *mehendi* (henna) art, others their cooking skills, and everything from how to inflate a bike tyre to inventing new games within the confines of one's premises. The 5-year-old girl next door featured, in a mix of slurpy childishness and confident professionalese, a range of interests on her YouTube channel, from her own cooking skills to various attractions in the neighbourhood, with her elder sister, a student of Mass Communication, showcasing her skills in the editing department. Subscribing to each other's channels became analogous to friend requests on Facebook in the early years—a social capital of mutual celebration as the base for new connections. It was at this juncture of a general sense of adventure into the new media, the excitement of the fairground (the other name for fairground is 'exhibition'), that a video by 9-year-old Fayiz, a resident of Kondotty in the Malappuram district of Kerala, went viral. This serves as the immediate context of this paper.

Fayiz's video (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NcmiXStaJvk) begins like a typical DIY video. He announces that the video will demonstrate how to make a paper flower. He lists out the requirements: a sheet of paper, a pen or pencil, a pair of scissors. Events follow in a typical fashion: do the markings on the paper, fold here, cut there, etc. The deeds are done, and Fayiz is now about to unveil the work of art. What follows is a twist. This is no paper flower. The paper is all haphazard—this is a botched-up operation. This typical ubiquitous DIY video has thrown up surprise on the face of the sympathetic viewer. She is shaken out of her complacency. Her distraction is suspended at a moment in which the mechanically reproducible image now threatens to infuse her quotidian space with the magic of novelty. For a fraction of a second Fayiz is speechless. And then he says:

> It turns out okay for some, and not okay for some others; mine has not turned out alright, it has come in these two such shapes, so it has not come alright for me, mine has come out in a different model [stutters a bit, but soon recovers…trying to fold the paper as it should have looked] a flower like this has to be made, various… various… (*palethum palethum*). If it is so [not sure if he is referring to the ideal version or the one it has become], I don't have a problem if it's become different…different…it's okay.

Fayiz's dialect is the thick south Malabar associated with rural Muslims. For a brief moment, it felt as if Fayiz was not looking for words: the words were gushing forth. Language becomes unintelligible, though briefly. Fayiz soon recovers, but not fully—his pace has changed. There is an urgency now; and yet he perseveres in the act. What is most interesting here is one's reaction in such an unexpected situation, a state of affairs in which one has passed from being a master to having to hold ground at what appears to be a loss of face. What is also interesting is that the video gets made regardless. In this, Fayiz upsets the contract of DIY; that it should be an imitation of the professional show; that it should showcase aspiration while playing the underdog, the person next door. At least one report states that Fayiz had not intended the video for circulation, but his sisters sent the video to their father, a resident in the Gulf, who then shared it with his friends. The video goes viral, and Fayiz's line, in a contracted, newer version, 'Some get it alright, some don't, mine has not come right', becomes a catch phrase employable for political criticism as well as corporate sloganeering. Fayiz was reportedly paid some royalty for the line that was eventually used in the Milma (Kerala Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation) advertisements. Numerous videos, which banked on Fayiz's initial successful run, reproduced large portions of the video while going on to hail Fayiz as a role model, to various principles of pedagogy, almost in the exegetical tradition. A local news channel did a couple of stories on the many gifts that Fayiz received from organisations and individuals, big and small. Fayiz was also hailed for contributing the royalty he received from the Milma advertisements to the Kerala Chief Minister's Distress Relief Fund.

The subsequent sections are an attempt to understand the success of Fayiz's video by reading it as a specifically cinematic event: the pleasures of looking, intersecting with an effervescent zone of recognition and mutuality.

ATTRACTIONS AND DISTRACTIONS

Not so long ago in the history of ideas, Tom Gunning professed the idea of 'cinema of attractions' (1986). Gunning's key contention was that the history of the cinema was not the history of realism. On the one hand, this is purely an academic point made in the context of the discipline of film studies, which was shaping up in a particular way

with Andre Bazin as its *ur* moment. The discipline, as it was shaping up through the momentous debates of the 1970s and 1980s, tethered the larger debate to culture industries, and the questions of structure and agency to questions of realism and identification. In doing so, the discipline fixated upon narrative cinema to the exclusion of almost everything else. The centrality of narrative cinema implied the intelligibility of narration as well as a particular corporeal mode while being addressed, where one was bodily immobile while also contemplative, moved by, or moving along, with the narrative. The audience here was primarily the contemplative individual whose inclusion in the narrative community, and thereby a sort of symbolic citizenship, was premised on her ability to interpret what was taking place on screen, to which one's access was as if from another world, as in through a keyhole. This distance, which is on the one hand elaborative of various power relations between the screen and the audience (and those within the confinement of the screen), had, therefore, the guarantee of inviolability, operationalised through such techniques as the actors not looking directly at the camera.

As was the case with the disciplinary history he was contesting, Gunning's contention is invested in the world-transforming possibilities of cinema. By wrenching the history of films, as crafted by the discipline, away from realism and the attendant contemplative viewer, Gunning aimed for two relocations: one, to shift the site of cinematic reception away from the mind to the body; and, two, to shift the location of cinematic realisation away from cinema halls to the fairground. To Gunning, the historic potential of cinema was in the milling fairground, where people crowd around the machine that opened to them a world of possibilities, where they reacted corporeally and immediately to what they saw. One could imagine the crowd laughing at the jokes, amused by the tricks. Here, the actors did not shy away from looking into the camera. It was straight talk that required no interpretation. Drawing from Eisenstein, who sought to move his audience, Gunning used the term 'attraction' to suggest these affective intensities that were capable of refashioning the world.

Half-a-century before Gunning, we find the use of an antonymous term for attraction to express a similar view of politics. Walter Benjamin (1968 [1936]), in counting the blessings of mechanical reproduction towards an art of the people, counted

'distraction' as a virtue of the moving film. Just like touch, sight was now employed in 'an incidental fashion', rather than through contemplative rapt attention. The turning of sight into a habit, i.e., sight which is guided in its perception by tactility, was characteristic of the turning points of history, one of which he was living through. This relocation of sight to the everyday overlapping of senses, and away from primacy it is accorded in traditional art, is what Benjamin calls 'distraction'. The distraction divested the mechanically reproduced image of the aura of belonging to a particular space and time distant from the quotidian.

Both 'attraction' and 'distraction' share the basic programme of making film more participatory and corporeal. Participation as much as representation is seen to be the means to realise the transcendental possibilities of cinema, which, however, is outside cinema itself—world making. The participatory nature of film was to emancipate them from their placement in the alienation and luxury of contemplation. For Gunning, attraction is an order of visceral intensity, a conceptualisation that allows him to distinguish it from realism, which, as we know, may well be attractive in the general sense. This divorce of the intensive–affective from realism is also in evidence when cinematic populism is associated with the need to 'perform' in excess of the realist moorings of the diegesis (Srinivas, 2013: 203–6). What Gunning himself overlooks, and what Benjamin perhaps did not wish for, is what may be called, quite ironically, 'the democratic aura', i.e., the libidinal investment in the *accident–ability* of inhabiting the screen, capable of overriding the genealogy of the specific object/individual. As Žižek points out in Sophie Fiennes' *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), the cinema teaches us *how* to desire, and there is an attraction to its very frame, independent of its generic moorings. If one were to extend this to the study of populism, then to acknowledge the power of cinema is to see the very frame as a space of potential mobilisation generating energies not only around it, but as operative through it.

FRAMES OF POPULISM
There is no apparent popular concern for which Fayiz became a mascot. Therefore, to foreground Fayiz's video to discuss populism appears forced. However, that is precisely what I intend to do. This is because, first of all, to attribute the video's success to its alleged

inspirational quality discounts its specificities, except perhaps as a pathetic backdrop. Fayiz's video was widely shared, and resonated beyond the regional–religious particularities that characterised it. On the other hand, however, the reason it resonates, that lends it the authenticity-effect and makes it interesting as a video, the realism effect which leaves us unprepared for the twist, is the dismal video quality and the cultural particularities. As such, this particularity cannot be ignored, even in its universal circulation. That the boy is only 9 years old, that he speaks in a dialect at a far remove from the educated tongue, that the video quality is so poor—all of these invoke energies that are hardly contained in the life-lesson of accepting mistakes and not stressing oneself too much. The second reason why I insist on reading the video along the lines of populism is to interrogate the possibility of looking at populism as a zone of participatory practices and energies available for articulation and mobilisation, rather than as a mobilisation on a specific issue or around a specific symbol. This zone of participation is activated through historically intelligible shared articulations that provide the affective force to a discourse that may channel this at another time.

Theorists of populism, whether cinematic or otherwise, have pointed out the crucial conflation of two different kinds of representation in populist figures, whether they be stars or politicians. While the first kind is speaking for, as in an elected representative speaking on behalf of his constituency, the second is that of acting as, as in an actor representing, say, a demographic segment by acting as one of them. The limitation of studying both these performances as representations is precisely that—that they are limited to the realm of representation and, therefore, ideology and intelligibility, which, in contrast, could be seen as performative acts that inscribe a mode of belonging and its outer boundaries. To represent is also to act; i.e., it is also a performance. To deny the acting body and to see only the action as a representation is also to disregard the potential of the action as a body in motion, and to treat it as an abstraction operative in the realm of meaning. A refocus of our critical lens on the performance itself would, on the other hand, allow us to see community formations at the intersection of representation and intensive–affective belongings. Where we could only see imitation (whether of star or politician), we would be able to see participation through which one proclaims one's belonging. Where we could not see imitation, but only the establishment of a new symbolic order, one where the audience identifies with that which is different from themselves (Prasad, 2009), we could now acknowledge an index of gestures and temperaments that seeks to activate a zone of co-emergence between the populist demagogue and the 'masses'. The star body is the most publicly accessible reference point of this zone, the autonomy of which has to be maintained discursively so that the inconsistency in performance on the part of the star body could be excused (not celebrated) or disregarded, thereby activating the radical but bounded democratic space that allows for human follies, even while keeping the participatory space intact—referred to as the two bodies of the star (like that of the sovereign). My question is: Can we think of cinematic populism without a 'star' body, a zone of recognisable performance available only fleetingly, like the Benjaminian flashes of memory?

One could find the emblematic body of Fayiz's participatory realm in Malayalam comedian Mamukoya's early films which established him as a Muslim comedian. In the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the most successful genre of Malayalam cinema was full-length comedies, mostly of men leading multiple lives. Mamukoya's comedy was primarily associated with being a humorous simpleton, whose simplicity was above all established in his delivery of dialogue, so thickly accented with Muslimness. Some of the films used this thickness of accent for the comedic effect of the character unable to disguise himself. As the comedic underwriting of realism in a world transforming fantastically as a result of migration, liberalisation and globalisation, Mamukoya's religious identity stuck to him as an excess even when he was playing non-Muslim characters on screen, as his tongue would refuse to let go of the language that made him. Interestingly, his rare recent appearances—his leading role in Muhsin Parari's hip-hop video album, *Native Bapa* (2013); followed by *Funeral of a Native Son* (2016); the interviews he gave at the time as well as appearance in films such as *Aabhaasam* (2018)—have transformed him from this state of being excessively Muslim to being assertively countercultural (he makes an appearance in *HLS* as one of the funders of the new film). A generic 'thug life' video made of Mamukoya's yesteryear comic shorts, viewed over a

Mamukoya (front centre) in the music video 'Funeral of a Native Son'

million times on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-otPSkCtFsc), re-inscribed what was comic in the film to a register of daring and rebellion. What was yesterday a comically excessive accent is reinstated as confident truth-telling.

The Fayiz phenomenon could then be an illustration that participatory space—insofar as it is a space of recognisable gestures, physical or aural—does not even require a star body as the locus of dispensation. When set in a frame, anybody is potentially a site of recognition and elaboration, provided there exists a history which the body recalls into existence. To be sure, Fayiz was not imitating Mamukoya. My claim, on the other hand, is that Fayiz's performance accrues a historical density, which activates a zone of participation and intelligibility, a part of which is Mamukoya as he was, and Mamukoya as he is re-inscribed. Fayiz kindles an energy of which embarrassment is very much a factor not to be overlooked by claims of assertion. The burden of being peculiar is not easily shrugged away. The social energy of failure amounts to nothing if it is discounted of a sense of humiliation. Fayiz making a mistake becomes the particular act within a participatory effervescence which distinguishes itself by the historical capacity *to be mistaken*— to be wrong and to be taken wrongly. This double register—in which one is at the same time haunted by the need to justify, while also resentful of having to justify—activates a zone of affective belonging which, nevertheless, requires the other kind of attraction as a

counterpoint: one which stupefies because it is so beautiful and so perfect, so devoid of mistakes and seemingly impossible to imitate. Beautiful, immaculate, and yet so human, activating the memory, as it were, on one's body of the historical wrongs that separates *their* perfection from *our* mistakes, being mistaken for our incapability, and *them* mistaking for chronic failure our determination at a shot at an unrehearsed experiment.

CONCLUSION

The fascination with not-yet-cinema is, on the one hand, a testimony to the easier access to technologies of reproduction, but on the other, untenable without the attraction towards the frame and its attendant risks. A 'proper' 'refined' cinema of impeccable aesthetics as Establishment is key to the mobilisation of not-yet-cinema. The oneness of the spectral body with its people is realised in the defects of the amateur, which makes her thereby not yet at one with the establishment—the established aesthetic contract. But, most important, there is also another factor which tends to make the spectrality of such a body an immediate experience that is historic— that it is, after all, an accident of history, an unplanned encounter, a contingency that makes it imperative to seize the moment. The 'low culture' characteristic of populism, even as it is a failure and hence an engine for aspiration, is also, nevertheless, *patiency*, to use William Mazzarella's term (2017: 103), an active power to yield in the face of the unprecedented. To claim that the consubstantiated participatory body is assertively 'low culture' is to disregard the magical moment of solidarity in which one feels united by a moment of history (fate!), in which one has to toil with one's own inefficacies. This is what gives a 'mistake' its edge; that even if one part of it is to draw attention to the courage to make mistakes, then again the mistakes are themselves proof of a newly opened field, and hence of a new conquest, a dream that has come true at the instance of its recollection. And to not be the proper cinema keeps alive the hope that when it does turn proper, the transformation will not be limited to cinema.

◆

REFERENCES

Benjamin, Walter. 1968 [1936]. 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Hannah Arendt (ed.), *Walter Benjamin: Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books, 217–52.

Gunning, Tom. 1986. 'The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-Garde', *Wide Angle*, 8 (3 & 4): 63–70.

Karinkurayil, Mohamed Shafeeq. 2019. 'The Islamic Subject of Home Cinema of Kerala', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 10 (1): 30–51.

Hansen, Miriam. 1991. *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*. Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard University Press.

Mazzarella, William. 2017. *The Mana of Mass Society*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press.

Prasad, M. Madhava. 2009. 'Fan Bhakti and Subaltern Sovereignty: Enthusiasm as a Political Factor', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44 (29): 68–76.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 2003. 'The "Bollywoodization" of the Indian Cinema: Cultural Nationalism in a Global Arena', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4 (1): 25–39.

Srinivas, S. V. 2013. *Politics as Performance: A Social History of the Telugu Cinema*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, in association with The New India Foundation.

❖❖

FILMS IN PROGRESS

RATHEESH RADHAKRISHNAN

Reporting on the 48th edition of the International Film Festival of India (IFFI), held in November 2017, I had noted that the enduring image from the festival was that of the director Sanal Kumar Sasidharan at the main venue, holding a placard that said, 'Save Democracy', seeking his rightful place at the festival (Radhakrishnan, 2017). The saga of his film, *Sexy Durga* (2017), began with it winning the Prasad Digital Intermediate (DI) award for postproduction, instituted by Prasad Labs at the National Film Development Corporation (NFDC) Film Bazaar in 2016. *Sexy Durga* had premiered at the International Film Festival Rotterdam earlier in 2017, and had had a whirlwind international career at various film festivals, winning accolades and awards. In India, its first screening, to a packed house, was at the MAMI Film Festival in October 2017, after the film was cleared by the Central Board of Film Certification (CBFC). For certification, the CBFC had demanded a number of cuts and a change of title; the majority-appeasing right-wing government did not want a Hindu goddess' name to be linked to a word like 'sexy', even though the narrative of the film did not make any overt reference to the said goddess; Durga was the name of the protagonist. The film, now called *S Durga*, was selected as part of the 'Indian Panorama' section at IFFI, which was held in November 2017. Having publicly announced its selection, the film (along with the Marathi film, *Nude* [dir: Ravi Jadhav; 2018]), was dropped from the festival catalogue and screening schedule with no warning or explanation. During the last days of the festival, cinephiles, rushing between screens to catch their favourite films from across the world, could see Sasidharan and his lead actor running from pillar to post

Protest at IFFI: Screen grab from *Unmadiyude Maranam*

to get the film screened, and finally standing, having lost the fight, with placards. The image of the protest was widely circulated in the print media. This image also appeared in Sasidharan's next film, *Unmadiyude Maranam* (Death of the Insane; 2019; *UM*, hereafter).

Starting from and circling back to *UM*, this article attempts to discuss the status of cinema in India in the present, at a time when cinematic images increasingly cohabit with what would have been in an earlier time indisputably classified as non-cinematic moving images. The boundary between cinema and non-cinema is breached, and a film text/artefact is recognised as such through authorising practices, many of which were institutionalised over time. This has always been the case in the history of cinema, which is also a history of the constant re-imagining of these authorising regimes. As our image economy is being refashioned at a breathtaking pace, these procedures and practices, with their limitations and possibilities, emerge into sharp relief. I navigate this present through a discussion of the practice of 'film curation' during the time of the digital, institutions of incubation of film, which occasions a definitional difficulty, even for authoritarian control and the rapid increase in the number of films made, including those that remain unseen. I argue that the authorisation regime that helped classifications between cinema and non-cinema has been radically refigured in the present and that this refiguration, unlike before, is at the site of production itself. This results in the abundant existence of moving

image texts to which I shall refer in this article as 'films in progress'. While certain filmmakers find radical artistic and/or political possibilities in this non-definitional existence of cinema, I suggest that the changes in the image regime need to be better described and understood before we come to cinema's ethical and political raison d'etre in the present. This article is an initial attempt at such a description, a tentative first move towards assembling the tools of explanation and theorisation.

◆◆◆

UM was presented at the Asian Project Market of the Busan Film Festival in 2017. Having finished shooting in October 2017, the same month as the Indian premiere of *S Durga*, the film was completed in early 2018.[1] *UM* is an abstract tale, with a sleeping/dreaming man at its centre, in a world that considers dreaming a subversive activity. The narrative of the sleeping man emerges through a voice-over and a few staged, dramatic sequences regarding the anxieties that the dreamer generates in the immediate social world, and in the state's desire for control. Formally, *UM* is a collage of shots taken from television news reports, YouTube clips of real-life violence and of events—a few that replicate sensationalist YouTube videos of violence, shot by the perpetrators—and images shot on night-vision cameras to create a sense of dread. The 'documentary' footage includes images of violence by the right-wing moral police, the Kiss of Love protest, the murder of activists, police violence on Adivasis, the attack on filmmaker Sanjay Leela Bhansali, actor Sunny Leone's much publicised visit to Kochi, among others. The dramatised images include an attack on a group of revelling youngsters at a beach, and of a man and a woman being paraded naked and recorded on mobile phones by a crowd playing the moral police. Rajshri Deshpande, the star of *Sexy Durga/S Durga*, appears fleetingly as the violated woman. *UM* is also a collage of images of different kinds—still, moving, produced on digital devices, shots of multiple formats—in varied locations, including Kerala, Uttarakhand, Madhya Pradesh and Armenia. The cinematographer Pratap Joseph claims that 10 different kinds of cameras were used, including phone cameras.[2] The film was Sasidharan's response to his experiences of 2017, the year that also saw the assassination of the

journalist Gauri Lankesh, referenced in the film. It was amongst this breathtaking array of images that the image of Sasidharan and his actor at Goa, with their placards, appeared.

Although the film would have a formal (online) 'release' only in 2020, a few reviews appeared in 2018. One of the most detailed was by the film critic Anna M. M. Vetticad. She described the film as 'uncensorable', and hence clearly not aimed at the big screen. She writes:

> [F]estivals abroad that he has approached so far have found the film too personal or beyond the understanding of non-Indian viewers. […]
>
> E-platforms Sasidharan has approached so far have not bought into the concept either—not surprising since *Unmadiyude Maranam* is more wacky [*sic.*] and wacko than anything these websites have sourced from India so far.[3]

Vetticad, who was more or less reporting Sasidharan's own analysis of why festivals and 'E-platforms' (a usage that has since gone out of vogue) have not shown an interest in *UM*, also writes that Sasidharan wanted the film to be watched before the 2019 elections. He was clear that *UM* was unlike his other films. *UM*, with ambitions of being both a political tool and of having an international circulation, was an interim effort between his major productions. While he did present *UM* as one of his accomplished works, it appeared that he was clear its career would be markedly different from his other films, which were finding immediate global festival recognition. In fact, by the time Vetticad's review was published, he had already presented his next project, *Chola*, at the NFDC Film Bazaar in November 2018. *Chola* had its world premiere in the Orizzonti Competition section at the Venice Film Festival in August–September 2019, and was released commercially in December 2019. *UM*, aimed as a political statement, and hence intended for a viewership different from his other films—the electorate, but not quite—remained relatively unseen.

It would be inaccurate to say that the film was not viewed. Apart from those close to the filmmaker and his team, it was seen by two kinds of industry professionals: curators and film critics. The former appear to have been less than impressed, if one goes by the

fact that no festival selected the film in 2018 and 2019; in contrast, film critics, such as Vetticad, were supportive. *UM* was screened at smaller film festivals in Kerala and elsewhere in 2019. Announcing its premiere at the Panchajanyam Film Festival, held at Palakkad (Kerala) in January 2019 on Facebook, Sasidharan said that this was his favourite film. It was finally 'released' on the OTT platform MUBI in August 2020, following a spotlight on Sasidharan, where it remains available to watch. By this time, already a few months into the COVID pandemic, filmmakers, especially, but not exclusively, arthouse ones, appear to have reorganised their relationship with the distribution and exhibition of films, with the secondary status of OTT platforms suddenly transformed.[4]

Ostensibly, the standoff at Goa in 2017 appeared to be ideological as well as about the desire of the majoritarian state to demonstrate its might to both its constituency and the world at large. But, in hindsight, the issue was the Indian state's anxiety about its inability to control a new ecosystem of cinema. It was clear to everyone that *Sexy Durga's* incubation at the Film Bazaar would not be appreciated by the state.[5] It appeared that a pre-censored life had emerged for films, as 'films in progress', for which the Indian state had no means of control. IFFI's Indian Panorama, at its inception in 1977, was addressing a lacuna in the state's imagination of cinema: one of distribution, after the attempts at nationalisation of the sector and opening of exclusive theatres for arthouse cinema had failed. Through Indian Panorama, the Directorate of Film Festivals (DFF) became a pipeline for the distribution of arthouse cinema, well within the state's purview. Even though films at the Panorama were uncensored, they were vetted through sectors appointed by the state-initiated DFF. Film Bazaar, however, was a different beast. Most of the material that was available was not yet final 'censorable' film text.

I proceed with the claim, which, hopefully, will become clearer as the article proceeds, that the status of cinema as 'in progress', as exemplified by the 'projects' in Film Bazaar, could be used as a springboard to examine the larger difficulty that the Indian state is encountering in the new image ecology. This difficulty is manifested in its anxiety about censorship, and the response to which, by February 2021, is encapsulated in a set of regulatory guidelines.[6] The 'projects' that appear in Film Bazaar, especially

in its most visible segments—the Viewing Room; the latter's sub-segment, Film Bazaar Recommends; the Co-Production Market; and, of course, the Work in Progress Lab—are those that have not yet reached the point where they could be thought of as completed films. In most cases, a completed film could still look different, as it finds life as a film either with the audience or on the censor's screen. The digital production environment has created a condition where the film text is born unstable. This instability is unlike the possibility of infinite manipulation that film texts were subjected to, even during the celluloid era. Such was the instability at the level of circulation that film texts could be repackaged, re-edited or interpolated with (often pornographic) clips (Srinivas, 2003; Hoek, 2013). With the digital, the 'original version' is itself unstable. No one, neither the filmmaker nor the censor, can ensure its stability. It is this existence of cinema—of extended incompleteness—that we turn to now.

In what follows, I apply this point of instability to examine the practice of film curation. The site at which I have identified institutional forms, such as Film Bazaar, is a meeting point of the curator and the filmmaker, before the viewer enters the equation. Such sites, which exist on the sidebars of many international film festivals, are among the birthing places of cinema, especially of the 'arthouse' kind. I discuss the curator's practice and the filmmaker's response to the instability of film text in the present. In doing so, I hope to arrive at the predicament at the heart of cinema in the present, when it more and more appears to exist in a synchronic relationship with other moving image texts which were considered not-cinema.

◆◆◆

Viewing Room (henceforth, VR), a curated segment, has been one of the most successful segments of the NFDC Film Bazaar. In 2007, Film Bazaar was started as a sidebar incubation space to IFFI, and is organised by NFDC independently of the festival that is organised by the DFF along with the Entertainment Society of Goa.[7] VR, started in 2012, is geared towards presenting '[S]outh Asian films seeking finishing funds, world sales, distribution partners and film festivals', and its access is restricted to 'buyers, financiers, world sales agents

and festival programmers'.[8] Potentially, all the projects presented are 'films in progress'.

VR is located in a quieter part of the bustling Film Bazaar. As you enter the strictly regulated space, you are to leave your belongings at the door. VR is organised as a terminal of computer screens. Wearing a headphone, and finding your place in front of one of the screens at the terminal, you are provided access to a bouquet of films organised around various categories. The line-up includes an overwhelming number of films. In 2019, a total of 154 feature films and 59 short films were featured;[9] in the 2020 virtual edition during the pandemic, there were 122 feature films and 70 short films.[10] Any film yet to be premiered, having paid a fee, could become part of the bouquet. Among the films available is a set titled 'Film Bazaar Recommends', which has over time become a central attraction in VR. The website informs us that the films (and film clips) can be accessed according to 'parameters like duration, language, stage of completion, type and festival history, among others'.[11] Essentially, this is a database with links to films which could be accessed through searches using these parameters. The striking similarity with the experience of watching films on OTT platforms is not accidental. Much like the experience of the spectator at the OTT screen with its choices, the relationship between the industry professional at the VR—critics, programmers, curators, sales agents, and so on—and the films is not one of fidelity, the kind that the celluloid film experience demands. It allows for sampling and partial watching.

I argue that what the VR replicates is the practice of the individual curator, which is then extended into a full-fledged institutional form. Now available in different formats and geared towards (physical) film festivals, the curator watches her films on a personal laptop in an attempt to imagine its big screen avatar. The curator's computer is an interface that presents her with the condition of identifying and categorising film objects into a curated list to be presented at a film festival. The 2010s saw a rapid increase in the number of films that were being made in India, with filmmaking technologies becoming cheaper and more accessible, and with filmmakers being able to imagine a direct link to a distribution environment that ranges from Cannes to YouTube. The curator's data set includes films that have never entered the count of Indian cinema

production as, much like VR, these are 'films in progress', even if they are presented as completed. Such increases in production, along with the database model with which the curator works, and that which is institutionalised by VR, makes necessary modes of engaging with film both through 'distant' and 'close' watching—to appropriate terms familiar to us from literary studies (Moretti, 2013). Curators create lineages of practices from the maze of image-texts made available to them, trying to find textual and extra-textual patterns that make a film worth moving to the space of the film festival. This pattern includes preserving memories of earlier films, making links between them and new submissions, and imagining films within a particular film festival's historical framework. Curator Deepti D'Cunha's quip in a personal conversation that Microsoft Excel is the curator's most important tool makes perfect sense when patterning is taken to be central to curatorial practice.

The curator with such digital tools is a new entity. In the era of celluloid, Indian cinema banked heavily on two routes to film festival circuits. One was the Indian state. The films selected for the Indian Panorama at IFFI were part of a DFF catalogue that was sent out to global festivals, and in the 1980s these films were bought and screened by Doordarshan. In fact, much of arthouse production during this period took place with the promise of Doordarshan as a future buyer, via Panorama; by the late 1980s, Doordarshan was also directly involved in production. Individual curators, emerging from the film society environment, operated outside this state institutional set-up, but not fully independent of them, and through a network of relationships with auteurs within the reigning national cinema paradigm. This ecosystem came under stress in the late 1990s and 2000s, when films in digital formats could access the global film festival circuit without the aid of the Indian state. Doordarshan stopped being a reliable buyer of these films during this period. With the increase in films and in the number of film festivals within India and across the globe, the patronage system of distribution came undone. This led to the birth of a new kind of curator whose genesis is ineluctably linked to the digital.

I have already noted that there is simultaneous distant and close engagement with films with which curators are involved. While the distant mode involves large classificatory practices that are computational in nature, the close engagement with film

text indicates another dimension of the curator's art. The curator's practice in the new century centrally involves an act of 'scaling up'. By scaling up, I mean the translation from a smaller screen to a larger one as an act of imagination. The success and failure of film curation in the present depends crucially on the curator's ability to imagine this relationship: an engagement with the newly technologised aesthetics of cinema. As ever, this involves translating between contexts, but, more important, in visual scale. This relationship is at once about the film's ability to hold aesthetically on the big screen as well as the imagination of a public at the cinema. The latter is also a matter of scaling up: from the individual privatised viewer (the curator), to a film public.

The incompleteness of the film text that I identified in the case of VR is true for the curator's collections too. This adds one more dimension to the curator's art: of imagining a 'complete, final film'. Unlike the ability to scale up, which could be a measure of the curator's creativity, imagining the complete film, a necessary part of curation, is not in her control. For the practice to succeed, her imagination of the final product ought to be in line with that of the filmmaker's and other production conditions of the film. While deciding on the basis of works in progress is not a new problem for the curator, and could well have been known to the curator of the celluloid era, the digital ecosystem has amplified the problem in manifold ways.

At a preview screening of his film, *Nabarun*, on the life and work of the writer Nabarun Bhattacharya, held at the studio of the Raqs Media Collective in Delhi, in 2014, Q, the film's director, informed the collected audience, which included me, that he intended to re-cut the film before every screening, refusing closure. It is unclear if Q followed through on his plans, but the version screened on that day was 80 minutes long, while the version that exists on YouTube, uploaded on September 2019, is 77 minutes, and the version that was available between April and July 2020 in the VR of the Dharamshala International Film Festival is 83 minutes. Such *avant garde* gestures are an index of the new status of cinema. From a time when the 'Director's Cut' was a haloed object, which did not fundamentally upset the stability of the film text, we are at a time when the film text is never really fully final. Close to the general elections in 2014, Rakesh Sharma's documentary on the Gujarat

pogrom of 2002, *Final Solution* (2004), was uploaded on YouTube. The film exists as full text of over two hours, and as clips currently, which, unlike mainstream film, are not distributer-/user-generated; they are usually created by the filmmaker himself/herself. There are also sequences not included in the film that one can find alongside the film. These videos, including the full-length film, appear along with other connected/unconnected videos that the algorithmic backend of YouTube puts out for the viewer.

Here, it might be important to note that the breaking down of mainstream film texts has a longer history that goes back to the video/television moment. This was often done for extracting such attractions as comedy, action or song sequences, and functioned fully within the fan's playlist model (its sound counterpart being the mixtape). The present moment is not about the loss of the durational integrity of films, with the spectator's newfound control over the image that Laura Mulvey has pointed to through the categories of the possessive and the pensive spectator—one who owns the cinematic image, and the other who reflects upon it, respectively—which emerge 'as the film is delayed and [is] fragmented from linear narrative …' (2006: 161). In the case of the films I mentioned on YouTube, two new actants enter the logic: the filmmaker, for whom the film exists in an extended unfinishedness; and, algorithms.

The case of Anand Patwardhan's *Vivek* further provides us with clues to the new cinematic environment. It premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in 2018, with a duration of four+ hrs (261 minutes, according to reports) in eight parts. The film, as listed on Patwardhan's personal website, is 218 minutes long, with a shorter version of 157 minutes. In 2019, before the elections, the longer version of the film, now in 16 parts, appeared on YouTube. The authorial dissolution of the film into clips of lengths ranging from 12 to 16 minutes engenders a new mode of engagement with the film text. Meanwhile, in mid-February 2021, the highest-viewed clip of the film had approximately 1,75,000 views, while the lowest had about approximately 40,000. I point to these instances only to indicate how the condition of the existence of cinema is now foundationally in its status as an incomplete object. Specifically, it takes on a new ontological status, that of the YouTube clip, as dissimilar to the ontology of cinema. The centrality of

new screens to cinema's present-day existence, and its ramifications to the status of cinema, has been of interest to scholars engaged in the long-standing tradition of inquiry of cinema's ontological status. In popular and industry conversations, this has taken the shape of discussions about distribution and access. What is missing in these discussions is the mediating role of practitioners in the field of cinema, including filmmakers and curators, often tied in a conflict regarding their respective crafts, in creating conditions of categorisations of images.

❖❖❖

I return now to *UM* which, as I would suggest, attempts to incorporate the new moving image ecology into its narrative. The film should be read alongside the abundance of cinema, especially in the 'in progress' form, as it awaits its emergence as artefact and commodity when it is recognised by the institutions of cinema. This abundance should not be confused with the increase in films that materialise as films. Rather, the issue here is the abundance of film *texts that seek the status of cinema*—our 'films in progress'—through authorising institutional forms, which range from censor board certification to festival branding, at the Film Bazaar or at film festival submissions.[12] To understand this expanding ecology of cinema, we need to do a statistical analysis of 'films in progress' over the years that make gestures of aspiration to be authorised as cinema, along with close attention to textual and aesthetic practices. Such data will have to include, besides the films that appear in year-end lists of films, those which hope for such authorisation but never attain it.

The abundance of 'films in progress' makes categorisation difficult. Such film texts—some of which could end up on platforms, such as pad.ma, 'an online archive of densely text-annotated video material, primarily footage and not finished films',[13] or on YouTube, or remain on private computers (which could potentially be later repurposed as 'complete films', as in the case of R. V. Ramani's *My Camera and Tsunami* [2011])—inhabit a zone where the boundaries between cinematic and non-cinematic images are blurred; boundaries sustained over time by the institution of cinema, with the auteur filmmaker at its centre.

Frame grab from *My Camera and the Tsunami*

With the filmmakers themselves now placing cinematic images in these image habitats, the contours of cinema as an object needs to be attended anew. I would make one more move to suggest that the formal OTT environment contributes to this reimaging of cinematic objects. The upsurge in the popularity and visibility of anthology films and multi-part series, competing for space with cinema, is a symptom of a changed moving-image environment, which places them in a continuum with such moving-image aggregators as YouTube and Vimeo. While the latter kind of platform allows these objects to inhabit a public–political ecosystem, OTT platforms make possible image ordering that engages with the domain of (erstwhile?) cinephilia. Whether this blunts the radical possibilities of cinema, as it could potentially stay outside the image worlds created by 20th-century technology, is a question I defer for now.

UM nestles in its narrative body a considerable amount of footage that is documentary in nature, along with sequences shot to simulate such documentary effect. These are images that one would routinely find circulating on social media platforms and on YouTube. This usage is different from Haobam Paban Kumar's use

of footage from his own documentary *Phum Shang* (2014), in his fiction feature *Loktak Lairembee* (2016), integrating it seamlessly and unobtrusively into fiction or that of earlier practices of *avant garde* cinema of the past. In Kumar Shahani's *Maya Darpan* (1972), the use of documentary footage allows the eruption of history into the fictional. In contrast, in John Abraham's *Amma Ariyaan* (1986), the documentary impulse is seen as the virtual supplement to the fictional narrative. In *UM*, the narrator's voice, the few dramatised scenes of the community and the state attempting to regulate the

The dreaming 'insane': Frame grabs from *Unmadiyude Maranam*

'insane's' dreams, form the domain of fiction. The positioning of the narrator along with the community, as it recognises itself as 'us, townsfolk', creates a double tongue, where the community's narrative is seen as a self-conscious engagement with its own political conservatism. The choice of actor–screenwriter Murali Gopy as the narrator is interesting. Son of yesteryear actor Gopy, and the star of many Adoor Gopalakrishnan and G. Aravindan films, Mani Kaul's *Satah Se Uthata Aadmi* (1980), besides countless Malayalam mainstream films, Murali has been accused in the Malayalam public sphere of being sympathetic to Hindu right-wing ideology. This detail, obvious for those invested in the debates of the linguistic public, would have been invisible to those outside it.

The film invokes the question of 'fiction' and 'reality' as its central concern through a warning placed at its beginning: 'All characters and events are fictitious. Any resemblance to real life is solely because of the fictions they are involved in. Beware of the fiction in your vicinity.' Mimicking the statutory warnings that are required by law regarding the use of tobacco, a further warning is presented: 'Dreaming is injurious to health. This film does not intend to promote any kind of dreams.' The link between fiction and dreams—the former as something to be cautious of and the latter as a prohibition—creates a relationship between fictional framework and documentary images. In the film, the dreaming 'insane' is figured as sometimes CGI-generated, sometimes live-action human form, seen traversing the sky and waterbodies. As he dreams on, the voice-over tells us that the world is battling the issue of the political status of dreaming. The 'world', thus embattled, appears in the film through news footage, often with the logos of television channels visible. But, of course, there is fictionalisation at work here too, once again at the level of the voice-over. Real footage of the violence against Adivasis in Muthanga in 2002 is described by the voice-over as violence against dreamers, bringing all political articulations into the framework of dreaming, i.e., fiction. Ostensibly a 'political allegory visual essay', the film depends heavily on the voice-over, which gives it fictional unity. The film ends with an explanation of the use of images:

Television footages [*sic.*] and real-life video clippings are blended with fictional visuals to experiment with the cinematic experience

it regenerates. All the video footage are hyperlinked to real-life incidents, opening ways of researching them and re-searching them.

The exact nature of the 'hyperlinking' of 'video footage' with 'real-life incidents' remains unclear after watching the film. While the film's intention is to make a political claim on behalf of dreaming and for fiction *qua* fiction, the status of real events in the scheme of things, fictionalised through voice-over and editing, is not worked through. In the final instance, the film 'fictionalises' all images, but with a caveat—that they are 'real life' images. *UM* domesticates the different image forms, shot on different formats and accessed from different sources, into an ideological narrative. The voice-over of the film begins by suggesting that what has happened cannot be called a story (indicating fiction), but will be done so for convenience. This keeps alive the 'truth claims' of the documentary image, which is only being told *as* fiction. The appearance of the filmmaker and his actor holding placards, and the fleeting sequence involving the other lead of *Sexy Durga*, Rajshri Deshpande, exposes the investment in truth claims of 'what has already happened'. Thus, the film, in its eagerness to engage with the obvious political question—of censorship—sidesteps the question of image ecology.

For a viewer now schooled in the new image environment of incessant recording and circulation, what emerges in *UM* is a replication, under authorial signature, of her experience of inhabiting this ecosystem. What we find in *UM* is an elaboration of the problem that the surfeit of moving images has caused in the present day, disallowing for desegregating them generically, a problem that has been trivialised in most discussions under the wide umbrella term 'post-truth'. The film does not recognise the fact that the flattening of the new image economy—'we will tell it as fiction anyway'—is at the heart of the problem. *UM* is founded on the belief that the figure of the auteur and his ideological positioning would resolve the problem of the image's identity vis-à-vis the larger image world. The different kinds of images work in the film as though linked through keywords, where the algorithmic backend is replaced by authorial intent.

In creating such a collage, *UM* moves closer to the non-scalable spectrum of the image economy. During the production of the film, the problem of its definition as cinema had come into question. This was when the project was allegedly denied funding

by the Kerala State Film Development Corporation because of the many formats used.[14] The film finally found its audience only when filmmakers appeared to be ready to give up on big screens. For filmmakers, this is also an escape from censorship and the entanglement of cinema's distribution networks. But, in doing this, the instability of the cinematic object is furthered. On the small screen, cinema returns to the durational economy of clips. In this scenario, there remains no distinction regarding the 'films in progress' status of cinematic images at Film Bazaar, the curator's computer, and the status of the 'final' film as it returns to a wider image ecology. Sasidharan appears to have had a contradictory relationship with *UM* between his wanting it to be seen before the elections and his investment in the film festival infrastructure. The OTT platform appears to be the compromise, as it promises containment against the film's dispersal on platforms such as YouTube. But, as I have tried to suggest, this promise might be a mirage. This allows us to see the OTT platform as a more regulated version, one of value generation, of the larger image economy that we inhabit. And once we move below the line of the top platforms to smaller ones, we see that value generation in such platforms (mxplayer, Hoichoi) is rarely founded on differentiating cinema from the rest of image texts.

In 2020, OTT platforms have been accessed by different kinds of films: from the very experimental to those which, in a different economy, we would call blockbusters. What the year has done to the distribution and exhibition sectors of the film industry is yet to be fully understood. The stamping of films with the Cannes logo—an act of authorisation of film *qua* film—in a year when the festival did not take place, indicates that film festivals, at least the behemoths, will be back to reinstating the definitions and limits of the cinematic object. But for an image-saturated context such as India, where films/moving images are being made a dime-a-dozen, the authorising structures might remain inadequate. The curator's role, as the overseer of the 'films in progress', will continue to be central. If OTT platforms and festivals triumph, the curator will have to rethink her practice considerably, with her unique position challenged by the individual viewer focused on her individual, privatised screen. Neither scaling up, nor an imagination of the public, would remain relevant.

Or, as could well be the case, this too shall pass without changing the course of the wind.

◆

NOTES

1. This timeline is culled from social media.

2. See Pratap Joseph, facebook.com/prathap.joseph.3/posts/1632532646845267. 13 February 2018. Accessed on 10 January 2021.

3. See Anna M. M. Vetticad. '*Sexy Durga* Director Sanal Kumar Sasidharan's *Unmadiyude Maranam* is Wacky Irreverence in Search of a Platform.' https://www.firstpost.com/entertainment/sexy-durga-director-sanal-kumar-sasidharans-unmadiyude-maranam-is-wacky-irreverence-in-search-of-a-platform-5722311.html.

4. Many films, mainstream ones included, released on OTT platforms in 2020–2021. *The Great Indian Kitchen*, low-budget but with recognisable stars and rejected by major OTT platforms, released on a new, low-key platform NeeStream. It found unexpected success, leading to an immediate television premiere. The Mohanlal starrer *Drishyam 2*, sold at a higher price to Amazon Prime, appears to be similarly fated. I would not be surprised if, unlike the former, this film releases in theatres when it becomes possible to do so, based on the push it received on OTT platforms. The implications of these micro shifts cannot be fully predicted as yet.

5. An article in the *Economic Times*, published soon after the closing of the 2016 edition of Film Bazaar, noted:

    When Information & Broadcasting Minister M. Venkaiah Naidu was saying at the inauguration ceremony of the IFFI that 'cinema should preserve our tradition, our culture, our heritage', and how the film *Lava Kusha* (1963), 'with no violence or vulgarity', ran for months, the filmmakers at the Bazaar were boldly talking about crimes and punishment, love and loathing, sex and sexuality in their movies. Which is why when Naidu came to the Bazaar, someone muttered under the breath that the minister would hopefully not spot the poster of Sasidharan's feature film, *Sexy Durga*.

    See economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/entertainment/nfdcs-film-bazaar-becomes-indie-cinemas-go-to-place-for-funds/articleshow/55641481.cms. Accessed on 19 December 2020.

6. See livemint.com/news/india/government-sets-out-regulations-for-digital-media-ott-platforms-11614254583608.html. Accessed on 25 February 2021.

7. In December 2020, the central government approved the proposal to merge various film-related institutions in the country. 'Cabinet Approves Merger of Four Government-Run Film and Media Units.' https://www.thehindu.com/news/

national/cabinet-approves-merger-of-our-government-run-film-and-media-units/article33403066.ece. Accessed on 15 January 2021.

8. See filmbazaarindia.com/viewing-rooms/. Accessed on 16 January 2021.

9. See https://filmbazaarindia.com/pdf/2019/vrwip/List_of_films_in_VR2019.pdf. Accessed on 16 January 2021.

10. See https://issuu.com/filmbazaarindia/docs/viewingroom2020. Accessed on 16 January 2021.

11. *Ibid*.

12. MAMI Mumbai Film Festival, with one of the most vibrant Indian cinema programmes over the years, owing to its prestigious competition section and high award money, is on record that over the years there have been annual submissions of films in the range of 170–180 films that had not premiered in India. With the biggest pool of Indian films, as compared to other festivals in India, MAMI screens anywhere between 25 and 35 films in one edition. In the best-case scenario, this is about 20 per cent of the films submitted. Of the remaining 80 per cent, while we concede that about 60 films find other avenues for screening (a very generous estimate), the fate of about 100 films a year remains unknown.

13. See pad.ma/about. Accessed on 8 February 2021.

14. See Pratap Joseph, facebook.com/prathap.joseph.3/posts/1632532646845267. 13 February 2018. Accessed on 10 January 2021.

REFERENCES

Hoek, Lotte. 2013. *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Moretti, Franco. 2013. *Distant Reading*. London: Verso.

Mulvey, Laura. 2006. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion.

Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh. 2017. 'We Need to Talk about Indian Panorama: A Report from International Film Festival of India 2017', *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies*, 7 (1).

Srinivas, S. V. 2003. 'Hong Kong Action Film in the Indian B circuit', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4 (1).

◆◆

ASPIRATIONAL CINEMA
Circuits of Cinephilia, Amateur Films and Local Film Festivals

MADHUJA MUKHERJEE

This paper proposes a provisional term, 'aspirational cinema', so as to delve into the advancement of a particular type of 'amateur' film/video in West Bengal. These films induce the memory of art-house cinema in conjunction with wider cinephilia, and are made predominantly with an aspiration to secure a screening slot at upcoming or newly established film festivals. The proposition 'aspirational cinema' is being furthered to consider the interlinked, yet distinct, practices and conditions in West Bengal. The first point is the making of a set of individually produced films/videos, which have developed from a long history of cinephilia (and film society movements) (Ghosh, 2019), as well as the broader political–cultural milieu. Second, I argue that such films/videos become meaningful through careful selection and curation by independent, local and subject-oriented film festivals which are being organised in West Bengal as well as other parts of the country (Mokkil, 2018). Transactions of digital files in India have been considered at length, principally with reference to their (paralegal) circulation, and research has been conducted on alternative and regional industrial productions as well as their mutations with other media forms. However, there are few studies on the variety of local and autonomous films/videos, or on their production and circulation strategies, and the channels via which they find an audience and thus become the dynamic data of contemporary contexts. Therefore, I examine such films/videos vis-à-vis locally organised 'international' film festivals, which have expanded exponentially with the easy availability of digital and computer-based projection systems,[1] thus becoming a much sought-after space by aspiring filmmakers.

I examine the current phenomenon of image making, and discuss local formations and conditions that result in what I describe as 'aspirational cinema'. I differentiate aspirational cinema from art-house cinema as well as so-called lesser initiatives, including the spate of amateur films and videos. While studies of avant-garde and art-house cinemas bestow a certain clarity on the movements, styles, festival networks and canonisation of the 'auteurs', readings and case studies of amateur films vary considerably, often overlapping with research on home videos and other subcultures. Moreover, given the range of material generated from India, and broadly speaking in South Asia, there are only some emerging research methods which tackle the parameters of digital filmmaking (Schleiter and Maaker, 2020), particularly because a large body of films/videos—which may be further classified as features, shorts, documentaries, video-essays, video-diaries, video art, performance art, among others—drift along the margins of media fields, sometimes via online platforms by means of fringe festivals, and various other modes of file sharing. Therefore, I deliberate on a certain tendency and explore the 'located-ness' of such films/videos to analyse the circuits of media files. I contend that, for many independent filmmakers and artists, the small-scale, local and relatively newer festivals become one of the prospective and aspired sites as well as points of entry into the wide arena of professional filmmaking.

In a previously published paper (2019) I had proposed a framework explaining the recent digital turn as 'Little Cinema Culture', to underscore and understand contemporary digital practices in India. By 'practice', I imagine a critical history of 'doing', long-term engagements and self-reflective actions in relation to filmmaking as well as associations and networks of artists, writers, filmmakers, groups and organisations. Here, I had primarily deliberated upon the ways in which the current streams of video and digital filmmaking in West Bengal are connected to longer and forceful histories of political movements as they refract through print cultures/Little Magazines, theatre/'Little Theatre', and experiments with the filmic medium/ 'Little Film'.[2] In that respect, Laura Marks' seminal theorisation of 'intercultural cinema' became effective, operating as a reflective backdrop to grasp the complex field of autonomously produced films/ videos, magnified via self-consciously positioned film festivals (2000). Moreover, Marks' work on hundreds of lesser-known films (shorts) put in the picture the import and rhizomatic nature of such activities and undertakings, which I describe as 'aspirational cinema'.

In this paper, by means of the expression 'aspirational cinema', I specifically draw attention to a discrete mode, in which the intentions of the filmmakers (high art/high theory/cinephilia and film festival accreditation) and features of the final product—which are often cheaply and quickly produced with consumer electronics and non-professional cast and crew—are seemingly in contradiction. In fact, these are generally produced along the lines of what Kartik Nair has described as 'tiffin-box production' in the context of the cottage industry of low-end film production.[3] Even when this contradiction is *not* the fundamental aspect of 'aspirational' films/videos, it becomes a lens to recognise the complicated accounts and approaches of production. In many cases, such overtly 'male hobbies'—for instance, a writer or a student or an engineer making a 'zero-budget' film with friends and associates, by means of easily acquired equipment—are also evident in other arts, including theatre, the performing arts (inclusive of music) and print cultures. Such 'aspirational' literary texts, however, generally become fertile ground for discursive engagements, while filmic texts frequently develop into heady assemblages of multiple concepts, performances, subtexts, quotations and found footage. Moreover, although certain low-budget narrative films (produced at the edge of mainstream industry) occasionally find a release on YouTube, on local TV channels and even on OTT platforms (Chatterjee, 2020), the video-essays, video-diaries and narrative shorts made by the 'aspirants' commonly circulate within the web of community grids, and are sometimes screened at local festivals, which, nevertheless, have limited scope and reach.

My concern is *not* the so-called lack of technical skill of such films/videos or their apparent inadequacies in connection with their critical objectives; rather, I spotlight prevalent cultures and practices, and draw attention to the fact that while established book fairs have been able to involve the astonishing array of (not so-erudite, yet dynamic) Little Magazine publications, such 'aspirational' films continue to flow outside the courses of recognised festivals.[4] It thereby leads me to enquire: What is the function of such 'aspirational' films/videos, and what do they impart to us about the contemporary audiovisual ethos? Where and how are these produced, from where do they arrive, and where do they go? In short,

I am speculating about a possible method of reading such copious 'hobby' films/videos and their cinephilic inflictions, which I term 'aspirational cinema', and link it with the expansion of independent film festivals in order to unpack its many components and networks. The purpose, therefore, is to consider digital cultures and the ecology of film festivals, which have proliferated across media geographies in the last 10 years or so. The films discussed here became available to me through my work with TENT Little Cinema International Festival (Kolkata) for experimental films and new media art (2014–2018), as well as through my involvement as a member of the Jury of the 12th International Inter-University Short Film Festival, 2020, organised by Dhaka University Film Society and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Biswas, 2019).

CASE STUDY 1: NOTES ON LOCAL AKA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVALS

From 2014 onwards, TENT Little Cinema International Festival (Kolkata) for experimental films and new media art (henceforth, TLCIF) has generated transregional dialogues, and emphasised specific issues such as medium and form as well as questions of gender, ecology, politics, migration and resettlement. The first TLCIF (2014) was inaugurated with a screening of *Ghasiram Kotwal* (dir: K. Hariharan, Mani Kaul, Saeed Mirza, Kamal Swaroop, et al.; 1976; digitally restored print); its screening at TLCIF was the film's Indian premiere, courtesy Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata. Furthermore, the first edition of TLCIF also screened Kamal Swaroop's illustrious documentary *Rangbhoomi* (2013), based on the life and works of D. G. Phalke, courtesy India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore. In addition, TLCIF (2014) programmed video works by emerging media artists, and sought new interpretations of 'experimental' cinema and new media art. Thus, TLCIF became a platform which brought together a variety of contemporary experimental films and videos made available principally through the Berlin International Film Festival (Berlinale), International Short Film Festival Oberhausen, and Kasseler Dok Fest (with the support of Goethe-Institut/Max Mueller Bhavan, Kolkata). Similarly, the film programmes curated by Difference Screen, UK, and Unbound Studio, India (2nd TLCIF, 2015) as well as packages from Indian institutes such as Film and TV Institute of India, Pune, and India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore, accentuated the continuities

and breaks within alternative film styles, and generated compelling dialogues between such categories as documentary, fiction, animation, experimental, video-essay and video art.

In addition, the collaboration in 2017 with THE WOW PROJECT (We are One World, 2017–2018), which aspired to create a worldwide network of curators and partners that would bring forth the diversity of experiences and local contexts, presented an expansive range of experimental videos produced across countries.[5] Alongside such curated programmes, the 2nd TLCIF (2015) also exhibited on-site installations and curated shows designed by the author, and other individual artists and researchers. Such international alliances effectively fashioned a patchwork of ideas, and highlighted the complex interconnections between South–South, Asian countries and across decolonising worlds and, hence, produced a quilted and multi-nodal landscape within the wider rubric of 'experimental' and new media art. Additionally, with the 3rd TLCIF (2016), TENT had extended its collaborative networks with CAMP studio, Mumbai, as well as with individuals and eminent cultural studies scholar and filmmaker, Soyoung Kim. The 3rd TLCIF therefore commenced with the award-winning film, *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf* (dir: Shaina Anand, Ashok Sukumaran; 2013), and closed with *Heart of Snow, Heart of Blood* (dir: Kim Soyoung; 2014).

In fact, TLCIF has presented several award-winning films—*Ensueñoen la Pradera* (Reverie in the Meadow; dir: Esteban Arrangoiz Julien; 2017); *The Men Behind the Wall* (dir: Ines Moldavsky; 2018)—which have shaped conversations at multiple levels, and beyond boundaries. The 'Experimental Essay Reality' section of the 5th TLCIF (2018) presented the winner of the Golden Bear, *The Men Behind the Wall*, which violates gendered codes of conduct and volatile political boundaries. Similarly, *Ensueño en la Pradera* (screened at the 4th TLCIF, 2017), winner of the Silver Bear, recounts Mexico's challenging living conditions, the violence that grips the country as well as the extortion that much of the population endures. Such political discourses and the idea of 'praxis' were further expanded during the 5th TLCIF (2018) through films/videos (both feature length and shorts) curated by research scholars associated with filmmaking and artistic projects. The knotty subjects of political history, geography and ecology were programmed in conjunction with documentaries and narrative fictions directed and produced by

the feminist Iranian filmmaker, Manijeh Hekmat (curated by research scholar Sreemoyi Singh, as 'Women and Revolution[s]) (Simon, 2002). In a manner of speaking, Hekmat's films were programmed for the 'first time' for Kolkata audiences, and, therefore, redefined certain perceived notions about Iran and its political scenario.

The previously mentioned award-winning and international films/videos were, however, juxtaposed to more or less unfamiliar shorts, video art, documentaries and animation produced in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh by individual artists and students. Such selections, curation and apparently 'random' programming (of award-winning films alongside unsung projects) were planned to accentuate the shifting political histories and political engagement of the makers. For instance, the 'Cinema People/People's Cinema' package of the 5th TLCIF (2018, curated by the author), included films acquired through *Dawn* (Pakistan; courtesy Iftikhar Dadi), and via individual filmmakers, artists and students based in Dhaka (courtesy Robiul Alam Robi). The two Kolkata films—*Tracts of Dust* (an experimental documentary by Sudipto Basu, et. al; 2018) and *Ismail* ('hand-painted fiction' by Ansuman Chakraborty; 2018)—dwelt on the unprecedented growth across Kolkata wetlands (on the eastern side), and the city's irrevocable transformations across the north–south axis at the turn of the century, respectively. The architectural map and visual graph that *Tracts of Dust* produced in relation to its haunting soundtrack makes it an exhaustive document, as well as a pointed observation of a city that is persistently expanding and yet narrowing its limits of participation.

Ismail, the 'hand-painted' film, developed independently following a workshop (conducted by the author in 2017, supported by German Consulate General, Kolkata), and has been (so far) screened only in the context of TLCIF. *Ismail* is the story of an aging migrant, a partially employed and physically ailing man, who fantasises about birds, fish and another world—he is the surplus of neo-liberal development across the cityscape. Ismail secures a job in a makeshift cyber café, but the extension of Metro lines ushers in new commercial investments down south (of Kolkata). Moreover, with the gradual expansion of Internet connections, such cyber cafés become redundant. Ismail, never a member of the powerful working-class movement in the city, becomes the residue of social churning. Eventually, illness, age, the winter and a delirious stupor devour him as he begins to imagine his flight with migratory birds.

The independent Pakistani shorts—*Hidayatkar* (dir: Ahsan Ali; 2018), about a fisherman who is also a filmmaker and producer (of 14 films) and *Background* (dir: Fazal Ahmad, Abdul Basit; 2018), about a 'junior' artist/supporting actor, who has acted in 160 films and worked in the industry for almost 50 years—the personal and reflective videos from Bangladesh and the two films about Kolkata (discussed earlier) connect socio-political drifts across South Asia, and more important, raise critical questions with regard to how such independent films/videos are made, and what they entail. Moreover, these indicate a network of researchers, scholars, students, artists, organisations and institutions, and the processes of circulation of 'aspirational cinema'. However, many such self-produced films/videos have one-time and fortuitous screenings, and eventually, a number of them pale into obscurity.

Fig. 1: Snapshots from *Tracts of Dust* and *Ismail*

CASE STUDY II: CITY, CINEPHILIA, CAMERA AND COMPUTERS

Considering that TENT Kolkata was imagined as an alternative art space to facilitate experiments with moving images, various artists from disparate fields came together to expand and redefine the meaning of art, cinema and media cultures. Accordingly, one of the early film shows at the erstwhile TENT space (a heritage building at Bipin Pal Road, Kolkata) was that of an independent and 'amateur' feature film, *This is not Funny* (2013), made by Shounak Kar. Kar, who at the time was an engineer, had made the film on his own initiative (with 5D camera and Zoom sound recording device) in association with a musician friend, about the city's languid pace and chequered life. The film is shot extensively across the city; a detached voiceover (by Kar) describes the city in many ways: as a city of 'elites', 'intellectuals' and 'joy'. The film explores inconspicuous activities by the river (recorded through the handheld camera's all-pervasive gaze); the (in)famously narrow and serpentine lanes of north Kolkata (presented through a walk that occupies seven minutes of screen time); certain locations of central Kolkata; the eastern bypass; and events at the well-known Kolkata International Film Festival and Kolkata Book Fair. The film discusses politics, the political impasse, the art-house film, cinephilia, popular cinema, TV, music, other media cultures, and effactually engages in 'spatial practice' (to evoke De Certeau) and creates an 'urban fabric' that operates through multiple registers.

The Kolkata International Film Festival scenes were shot on location (at Nandan Cinema), and thereby recorded the screening of *Vivre sa vie* (dir: J. L. Godard; 1962)—specifically the scene in which Godard quotes from *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (dir: Carl Dryer; 1928)—during which the cultured Kolkata audience imagined that the sound had stopped playing (see Figure 2). Kar also uses stills of the great masters of European art-house cinema, with the self-reflective voiceover presenting a sketch of the city's intense cinephilia. The 'Kolkata Book Fair' sequence repeatedly describes the types of artistes who occupy the space—artists, artisans, sculptors, painters, printmakers, textile printers, jewellers, musicians, photographers, politicians, activists, filmmakers, among others. Shot on location, an interview with K. C. Paul, a self-proclaimed scientist who asserts that the 'Sun goes round the Earth', highlights the density of such highbrow spaces.[6] Paul has attained a certain degree of notoriety on account of his 'theories', which he single-handedly propounded, published and publicised with graffiti across city walls. Truly, for the longest time, Paul was part of urban lore. As Kar's film shows, not only was the public acquainted with him, but Paul had hired stall space at the legendary Kolkata Book Fair and expressed his views unabashedly. In the recorded interview Paul claimed that:

> I have been saying this since '74. [...] Not a single pundit to prove me wrong. [...] Einstein? He is no scientist! [...] What about gravity? That's all wrong! [...] Black hole theory is wrong! Big Bang theory is wrong! [...] You call them scientists? I call them donkeys! [...] Read the [my] book. It costs 5 rupees.

The screening of *This is not Funny* (May, 2013) to an audience of aspiring filmmakers, students and media artists, I contend, enabled TENT to push forward its principal agenda: to connect disparate groups of artists through talks, shows, presentations and collaborations, and to create spaces of contestation. Following this, a number of screenings of somewhat unknown films and discussions/ talks at the TENT location—which is the residence of a historian— generated a liminal space that pushed the envelope of 'art spaces' as well as screening spaces (auditorium/halls, etc.). In due course,

Fig. 2: Snapshots from *This is not Funny*

the film was also part of the programme of the 1st TLCIF (2014), and, in time, Kar joined Satyajit Ray Film and TV Institute's Direction department, and hypothetically traversed the troubled route from amateur to professional filmmaking. He returned to TLCIF in 2017, with his diploma film, *Sex with a Monk* (2017), and a commissioned wedding video, *Titir Weds Aditi* (2017).

Fig. 3: Snapshots from *Titir Weds Aditi*

Titir Weds Aditi (short) has an endearing and meandering narrative style, and follows a day in the marriage between a Bengali boy (Titir) and a Punjabi girl (Aditi). The film emphasises the business of wedding ceremonies through its repetitive stress on excesses and eccentricities, fabricated by a structure of repetition and variation, accentuating the bizarre world of consumption. A sequence at the beginning of the film, for instance, dealing with the inadequate number of chapatis prepared by the caterer, lingers for over three

minutes on this single issue: 'Why are there only 20 pieces for 20 guests?' This sequence operates through various indexes as it presents the banality, boredom and bleakness of such ceremonies. A similar sequence transpires at the end of this film, in which an elderly woman anxiously looks around for her 'original' Swarovski earrings (bought by her son 'Babu')—the dizzy search continues for over four minutes. Reiterating in a loop as it were that the earrings were bought by her son in Italy, the woman appears both vulnerable and nervous, stupefied by growing networks of global travel and consumption. In-between, other scenes highlight the consumption of food, dazzling clothes, the many chitchats and loud music, which overwhelm the ceremony. The screening of *Titir Weds Aditi*, alongside experimental shorts (which also included *Ensueñoen la Pradera*), was intended to draw attention to the rhizomatic growth of film cultures across South Asia and the multi-nodal map of media geographies, additionally, to point out new formations and local narratives in the context of the digital turn. I also suggest that independent film festivals become an effective platform via which such plurality is addressed.

Furthermore, I wish to highlight how a five-minute short arrived at TLCIF via an email, at the time the 1st TLCIF (2014) was kickstarted. *A Man Without a Movie Camera* (dir: Suman Ghosh; 2014) was indeed shot *without* a movie camera, as Ghosh recorded his own cinephilic drive—seen searching filmmakers such as Jodorowsky, Q (Qaushiq Mukherjee), Pedro Costa, among others— on the computer. Emphasising algorithm, computer programming, and the function of new media as an intimate interface between cinema and its audiences, alongside the use of found footage, the film reminds us of the beginning of the end of cinema as we knew it. Ghosh's short/animation/computer-generated imagery and recordings of Google searches signalled a new world immersed in new media practices. A heady mash-up (produced independently by so-called 'casual' films) of computer-based searches, recorded by the 'trial' version of the 'Screen Recording Suite', snapshots of algorithms, found footage, blue screen, playlists as well as images of the maker (recorded by the built-in camera) and his tribute to 'open source, Linux', reflect on the figuration of the new artist (with a small 'a'), and the cinephilic zeal that motivates such projects. Such modes of production and their circulation via digital platforms

(YouTube uploads, file sharing, screenings at 'fringe' and ephemeral festivals) alert us to the dynamic and parallel growth of audiovisual material across media landscapes, and their toing and froing between personal files/folders and public shows.

Figuratively speaking, *A Man Without a Movie Camera* reiterates the idea of death of *both* the author and cinema, and gestures toward the manner in which cinephilia, technology and film cultures are being re-imagined. For instance, the video's narrative principally elaborates a cinephile's web-based searches, his love for world cinema, and emphasises—repeatedly—that no camera was used to record such actions; and that the computer itself *is,* or comprises, the camera; the editing system, which assembled the shots as well as being a resource of film/video (and music) files, a means of collating material (through downloads); and a circulation or uploading device (see Figure 4). In comparison to the uses of the hand-held camera in *This is not Funny* and the scenes recorded inside Nandan Cinema that comment on city, cinephilia and the publics, *A Man Without a Movie Camera* signals emergent technologies, newer modes of (electronic) cinephilia—as opposed to the physical gathering of people during film shows—and the arrival of the individual viewer who controls his choices of viewing alongside the production of films/videos. While Suman Ghosh, an engineer by profession, did not join the public screening of the film, the fact that he sent his video via email to the TLCIF committee informs us
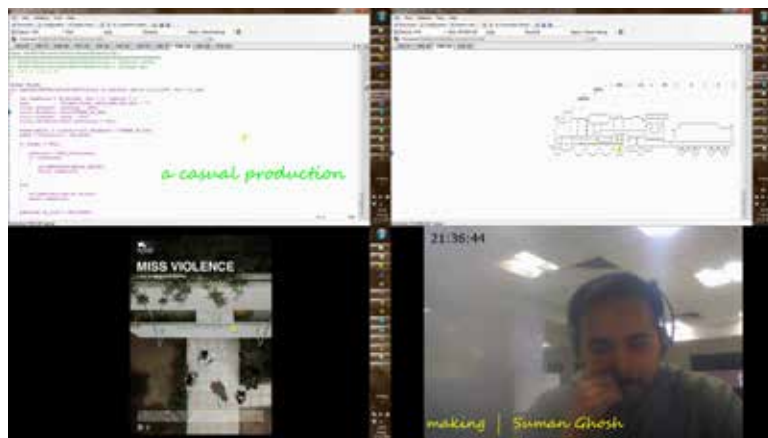

Fig. 5: Snapshots from *This is not Funny*

about two or three of the possible factors which shape such films/videos: cinephilia, the easy availability of consumer technologies, and the aspiration to festival accreditation and a certain degree of (momentary) recognition.

In conclusion, I wish to accentuate how diverse types of films/videos coexist across the Global South, in Asian contexts and in decolonising worlds, which vacillate between amateur films/videos and art-house cinema (as in the case of Sounak Kar, who graduated from being an 'amateur' to a 'professional'), and, consequently, produce multi-planar texts and a multi-nodal, socio-cultural map. Such films, as discussed earlier, circulate via personal networks and digital platforms, and operate outside the tracks of reputable film festivals. TLCIF, so to speak, reconnects such local films/videos with world cinema, although it considers other functional categories, such as medium (video/celluloid/other), duration (short/feature), genre/style (experimental, fiction, documentary, performance videos, video art, animation, 3D films, etc.) for its programming. Equally, contemplative curatorial projects generate trans-regional dialogues, and also underscore how a fervent cinephilia percolates films/videos, with the easy availability of (Canon) 5D cameras, Premiere Pro/Final Cut Pro, Zoom sound recorder, etc. Indeed, the prevalent approaches of studying alternative cinemas through the lens of art movements become ineffective in the face of contemporary digital practices.

Fig. 4: Snapshots from *A Man Without a Movie Camera*

Consequently, the late shows of TCLIF, which were often sparsely attended, and/or attended by a core group (comprising filmmakers and artists), were packed with several 'aspirational' shorts/features, categorised under different headers: 'City Flicks', 'Kolkata/City Shorts', 'Cinema People/People's Cinema'. Such films/videos accentuate the ways in which cinematic utterances across regions emerge out of intense cinephilia and the socio-cultural scenario. The inclusion of the 'aspirational' films/videos in TLCIF, therefore, is an attempt to make meaning of these growing multiplicities.

Notwithstanding these deliberations, this paper is neither an effort to generate any comprehensive classification of 'aspirational cinema', nor is it possible to produce any handy framework for the miscellaneous films/videos produced across territories with privately acquired 5D cameras, Zoom recording devices and assembled computers. However, my exposure to a range of 'student' films, produced across the globe (available through the 12th International Inter-University Short Film Festival, 2020), demonstrates the variety of objectives, production tactics and modes of worldwide circulation. For instance, Indian films (submitted to the festival) produced by film institutes presented a controlled application of medium and styles, while self-funded Tamil and Malayalam shorts emphasised gritty realism, just as the Bengali video-essay (an independent production) focused on growing bigotry, typically assembled found footage (from rallies) and affective micro-closeups, which were thereafter juxtaposed to heavy electronic music. These examples indicate the rhizomatic nature and ecology of local film productions, which are growing surreptitiously and in diverse directions outside institutional and commercial support. I suggest that such diverse films/videos are reframed through reflective curation (done by pre-eminent and long-running festivals) or find their way to small-scale local festivals, which themselves often run out of steam and close down abruptly. Presently, at the time TLCIF has been reimagined as TENT Biennale (2020–2024), Stefanie Schulte Strathaus (Arsenal Berlin, Board of Directors), speaking at the inaugural programme titled 'Expanded Cinema' (December, 2020), emphasised that 'what we try to do is to create a programme that works as a "programme"…like a text, or dance, or music,…but at the same time they are individual films, they need their space… and thus, they speak to each other'.[7] Similarly, the logic of the 'Cinema People/People's Cinema' slot of TLCIF was to find a viewing frame for South Asian films/videos, especially those produced across Pakistan, India and Bangladesh. In the process, such self-reflective and self-funded projects, or that which I describe as 'aspirational' films/videos, become an active archive of the rapidly transforming present, just as festivals become an effective agency which can speak to and speak about a variety of media texts through its collage-like film programming.

◆

NOTES

1. See the special issue on Indian film festivals in *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, 2019, 10 (1).

2. Also see the article (Anon. 2010) on 'Super 8 Movement in West Bengal' in *Canvaspix*. https://canvas-pix.wordpress.com/category/articles/.

3. For instance, writing about the horror films made by the Ramsay Brothers, Nair (2012: 125) suggests that:

    Having hastily trained themselves into various filmmaking capacities, the brothers then assembled their cast, […] 'No need for cars…no need for stars,' Tulsi [Ramsay] declared. […] 'We say it was a tiffin-box production…it was like a picnic.'

4. On celebrated festivals, see Radhakrishnan (2016). Also see Mukherjee (2019).

5. Also see: http://wow.engad.org/madhuja-mukherjee-curator/.

6. On K. C. Paul, see https://scroll.in/magazine/901353/one-mans-four-decade-long-mission-to-convince-kolkata-that-the-sun-revolves-around-the-earth.

7. See the entire session here: https://www.facebook.com/tentkolkata/videos/2514748078825643.

REFERENCES

Biswas, Amrita. 2019. 'Tracing Kolkata's Cinephilic Encounters: An Analysis of Alternative Cinema in the City', *Studies in South Asian Film & Media*, 10 (2): 113–28.

Chatterjee, Subhajit. 2020. 'A Rendezvous with the Ghosh Brothers: A Sneak Peek into Bengal's Homegrown Exploitation Cinema', *South Asian History and Culture*, DOI: 10.1080/19472498.2019.1614300.

Ghosh, Abhija. 2019. 'Memories of Action: Tracing Film Society Cinephilia in India', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 9 (2): 137–64.

Marks, Laura U. 2000. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

Mokkil, Navaneetha. 2018. 'Queer Encounters: Film Festivals and the Sensual Circuits of European Cinema in India', *Studies in European Cinema*, DOI: 10.1080/17411548.2018.1433984.

Mukherjee, Madhuja. 2019. 'Little Cinema Culture: Networks of Digital Files and Festival on the Fringes', *Studies in South Asian Film and Media*, 10 (1): 23–40.

Nair, Kartik. 2012. 'Taste, Taboo, Trash: The Story of the Ramsay Brothers', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies,* 3 (2): 123–45.

Radhakrishnan, Ratheesh. 2016. 'Kim Ki Duk's Promise, Zanussi's Betrayal: Film Festival, World Cinema and the Subject of the Region', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 17 (2): 206–22.

Schleiter, Markus and Erik de Maaker (eds.). 2020. *Media, Indigeneity and Nation in South Asia.* London/ New York: Routledge.

Simon, Alissa. 2002. 'Manijeh Hekmat and Women's Prison', *Sense of Cinema,* 23, December. http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/feature-articles/hekmat/.

◆◆

HAPPY TOGETHER
Cinema's Collective Futures

NAVANEETHA MOKKIL

In public cultures of queerness in India, cinema has played a significant role. In 2017, as part of my research for a paper that juxtaposed embodied networks of cinema to more recent accounts of queer film festivals (Mokkil, 2018), I conducted interviews about memories of film viewing in the 1980s and 1990s in India. One of the recurring patterns in these interviews was that while recollecting experiences of film viewing, whether in theatres or other festival venues, there was an emphasis on the presence of others. The interactive and sensory experience of viewing was often referred to, especially the dynamics of watching sexually explicit scenes as part of a group. The folds of living and breathing surroundings in which we encounter a film enter into accounts of film viewing in which sexuality is on the surface.

The history of queerness and spectatorship in vernacular contexts in South Asia has to be placed within this sensual, and sexual, potential of cinema as a form of mass publicity (Mazzarella, 2013; Ghosh, 2010; Hoek, 2013). Contrary to popular perceptions of queer cinema as the product of digital technologies, multiple scholars point to the longer trajectories of global histories of queerness, publics and cinematic practices (Gopinath, 2005; Murtagh, 2013; Dawson, 2015; Damiens, 2020). My research shows how, in the history of mainstream film festivals in India, European cinema that acquired the status of art cinema in international film festivals functioned as an important channel to enable the circulation of 'queer cinema' prior to the 1990s—even when it was not labelled with this term (Mokkil, 2018). The permutation and combination of bodies, acts and desires in popular cinema in different languages

in India—e.g., *Randu Penkuttikal* (Two Girls; dir: Mohan; 1978), *Utsav* (Festival; dir: Girish Karnad; 1984) and *Deshadanakili Karayarilla* (The Wandering Bird does not Cry; dir: Padmarajan; 1986)—point to the public reception of queer desires in cinema. In this paper, I analyse a selection of recent films that have been labelled under the category of 'queer cinema', and examine how they speak to changing configurations of publicness and sexuality in the last two decades.

In narratives about 'sex in public'[1] in India, the practices linked to cinema open up the possibility of bodily acts, gestures, desires and fantasies that exceed the script of domesticated heterosexuality. These sexual energies within and outside theatre spaces can be located in the historical and ethnographic studies of film cultures in South Asia (Ali Nobil, 2016; Mini, 2019), as well as fictional and autobiographical narratives (Jameela, 2018; Vaidehi, 2006). In these accounts, the space of theatres and practices of cinema-going are interlinked with the enactment of romance, sex work and cruising. The nature of cinema, as a collective form of entertainment, shifts in significant ways with the coming of television, video and digital media that change the experience of viewing and modes of perception traditionally associated with it (Mulvey, 2005: 27). The links between publics and cinema have been reorganised in accelerated ways since the 1990s, with cities and towns in India undergoing infrastructural shifts, with the expansion of multiplexes (Srinivas, 2000; Athique and Hill, 2010), the growing popularity of new modes of accessing cinematic forms through downloads, DVDs, OTT platforms, and on devices such as laptops and mobile phones. These processes come into sharper relief in this period of social distancing—where every crowd or gathering becomes a place of potential biomedical threat.

These public health concerns about cinema at present recall the long-term association between cinema, physical gatherings and the fear of contamination. In colonial India, the moral and medical contagion associated with cinema was one of the key factors that led to the formation of the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) in October 1927. As Manishita Dass observes:

> This heightened sense of cinema as a dangerous space—of illicit desires and subversive ideas that posed a serious threat to public

health and to relations of colonial power and racial distinctions in British India—served as the immediate backdrop to the formation of the ICC (2015: 77).

The anxieties and contestations over cinema as a form of entertainment have often been discursively linked to its modes of reception in spaces where different bodies are in contact with one another. These unruly encounters within the space of cinema have animated the trajectories of queer desires in India (Mokkil, 2019).

There is a large body of scholarship on pornographic cinema and its sensory circuits in different contexts in Asia, such as Lotte Hoek's study of the circulation and exhibition of celluloid cut-pieces in cinema halls in Bangladesh in the mid-2000s (2020). Michael John Arnold, in his ethnographic study of Pink Film,[2] from the 1980s to the mid-2010s, observes that the erotic interaction between primarily male patrons in the physical space of the theatre drives this form.

> The law of the Pink cinema insists that screen space is almost completely negligible, but social space is not. Everybody in the auditorium must be totally active, aware, and physically, *tangibly* present. Viewers […] must always be ready to respond to the call of the physical world around them (2015: 8).

Accounts of cruising and the erotic potential of theatrical spaces have been central to histories of queerness in different parts of Asia. Increasingly, as theatre spaces become less accessible, and only one of the many ways of viewing cinema, we see the proliferation of a range of queer cinematic practices that are the products of digital technologies of production and reception. I aim to analyse how these recent films formally respond to the changing dynamics of publicness and intimacy. Accordingly, I suggest that the aesthetic practices of recent 'queer cinema'[3] from India need to be linked to changing configurations of collective practices of film viewing.

INTERCONNECTED WORLDS IN CINEMA

Multiple films that circulated under the label of queer cinema in the last few years—*Turup* (Checkmate; dir: Ektara Collective; 2017), *Irattajeevitham* (S(h)e/The Duel; dir: Suresh Narayan; 2018),

Kattumaram (Catamaran; dir: Swarnavel Eswaran; 2019), *Bulbul can Sing* (dir: Rima Das; 2019)—focus on the predicament of lives and relationships that unfold in the presence of others. Moving away from an investment in the bounded conception of the couple or singular journeys of self-recognition, which has often been the staple fare of LGBTQ cinema, the precarious terrains of intimacy in all these films are formed via negotiations with a larger public network. As practices of viewing cinema become more individualised in a material fashion, in the worlds of these films we see a staging of the publicness of sexuality and intimacy. Currently, we see the emergence of production and aesthetic practices that foreground a sense of collectivity and relatedness, even while these films might often be viewed in private spaces.

These are primarily small-budget films whose modes of circulation and reception are mainly through OTT platforms and screenings in film festivals. These films focus on sexuality as a force field that is intricately tied to vernacular social formations. They are invested in documenting intimacies and desires that are folded into the changing dynamics of specific places: the tsunami-hit coastal village in Akkaraipettai in Karaikkal, Tamil Nadu, in *Kattumaram*; the working-class neighbourhood of Chakki Chouraha, Bhopal, in *Turup*; the struggling fishing community in the coastal village of Anjangadi near Thrissur, Kerala, in *Irattajeevitham*; and the flood-prone Kalardiya village in Western Assam, in *Bulbul can Sing*. These locations are named and people in these places often appear as part of the cast, and are acknowledged in the credits of these films.

One of the promos of *Irattajeevitham* intercuts visuals of the film with shots of the crew with camera, lights and other equipment moving through the village. We see shots of actors in the film glancing at us, but the intercuts make it seem as if they are looking at the film crew. Thus, the fictional world of the film is interwoven with the practice of filmmaking in a coastal village.

Suresh Narayanan, the director of *Irattajeevitham*, mentions the shooting was stalled for four to five months because of demonetisation, and that he and his crew spent a great deal of time mingling with the villagers in that period.[4] In 2005, Swarnavel Eswaran started working on the documentary project, *Nagapattinam: Waves from the Deep* (2016), on the relief efforts following the 2004 tsunami. In interviews, he observes that *Kattumaram* was born of

Figs. 1, 2, 3 and 4: Screenshots from the promotional trailer of *Irattajeevitham*. *Source:* https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dqLs0ol9KE8

narratives gathered during his decade-long work there that looks at the resilience of the fishermen, and the lingering and unimaginable trauma when the sea, which they worship as the mother, sweeps an entire family away in a matter of minutes:

> I was thinking of how to represent these stories. Initially I wanted to document the film and be with them. As I would do it, women told me stories of living in a patriarchal society and that also remained in my heart. Out of those events, I created a fiction […].[5]

Kattumaram is set in the same region, in Akkaraipettai, one of the fishing villages that bore the brunt of heavy destruction. Thus, this process of building relations with people and place is emphasised as part of filmmaking. These frames, through which filmmakers position cinematic practices that emphasise collective and interdependent modes of production, become significant for conceptualising the field of queer cinema in India. Queerness here is not only about the subject matter of these films being linked to non-normative desires and identities, but rather, is the envisioning of cinematic forms that dwell on the permeability, precarity and mutuality of acts of living. Recent interventions on global queer cinematic practices by scholars, such as Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt, ask us to attune ourselves to registers of cinema that

create experiences of queer belonging, with the capacity to 'imagine radical forms of social being' (2016: 215).

Turup captures this effort of 'collectivising cinema'[6] to explore new modes of belonging and relationality. Ektara Collective made the film as part of a collaborative process over the course of a year, along with the residents of several working-class settlements in Bhopal.[7] Reflecting on the process of making a film in which directorial credits are shared as Ektara, Rinchin and Maheen Mirza, script and screenplay writers of Turup, observe how cinema can be made on the basis of a shared vision and by improvising on everyday exchanges in a given setting:

> The visual treatment and shot taking style emerged from the script, actual locations and the actors. Like the dialogues, the frames were constructed around the action that the actors decided to play out rather than setting frames and then squeezing the action into it.[8]

They underline how the pace and rhythm of the life of the people set the pace and rhythm of the edits of Ektara's film in which the boundary between fiction and non-fiction is constantly blurred.

Turup was screened at the Bangalore Queer Film Festival, 'Dialogues: Calcutta International LGBTQIA+ Film & Video Festival', and its Mumbai premiere was organised by LABIA: A Queer Feminist LBT Collective in collaboration with Gender Amity Committee (GAC), Tata Institute of Social Sciences. Thus, it has circulated within the current networks of exhibition and reception of queer cinema. The structure of the film follows the overlapping lives of three women. It builds on the intricate textures of their interactions to open up a world in which the boundaries of religion, caste, class and gender are present, and yet not unsurmountable. The cadences of desire, romance and companionship in this film, especially as portrayed through the self-assured presence of Monika—who lives with another woman and calmly asserts that she has opted out of marriage—are entrenched within the fabric of the locality. The final shot of the film shows a framed photograph of Monika and her friend posing before the Taj Mahal, and then we see the two sit together to play chess. They share a quiet scene of intimacy and togetherness, moving the chess pieces, creating a back-and-forth exchange in which we are allowed to partake as viewers. Such rhythms mould the

register of the film, and create 'proximities suggested by its mode of narration and its terms of engaging us as spectators' (Schoonover and Galt, 2016: 213). Thus, desiring subjects are not posited as bounded and self-contained in this film; rather, they are shaped in the larger canvas of social relations in which the characters are in movement.

Fig. 5: Poster of Turup. Source: http://ektaracollective.in/films/turup/

Fig. 6: Frame grab from Turup. Source: http://ektaracollective.in/films/turup/

Similarly, *Bulbul can Sing* invites us into the fabric of intimate exchanges between three friends growing up in a rural setting in Assam. Rather than stabilising the identity of the young boy Sumon by using categories such as gay or transgender, we see him in relation to public dramas of love and sexual attraction. The fragility of romantic love is starkly presented towards the end of the film, when the idyllic sojourn of the school girls Bulbul and Bonny with their boyfriends is disrupted by a group of men who shame and attack them, and record their actions using mobile phones. The style of the film shifts in this sequence—we see jerky camera movements, flat lighting and a graphic exposure of the violence and acts of shaming. These scenes point at the manner in which contemporary performances of intimacy are embedded in technologies of chastisement and surveillance that are pervasive in rural and urban spaces in India today.

The climactic lesbian kiss in *Kattumaram*, shot on the seashore in spectacular fashion, is also interrupted by the presence of a hostile fisherman who rushes to spread the news of this transgression in the village. But *Kattumaram* does not set up a neat opposition between the lesbian subjects and the community in which they are anchored. What stands out in the film is the overarching presence of Anandhi's uncle Singaram, played by Tamil actor and director Mysskin, whose anxiety about his niece's future frames the film. The opening shot of the film is a back shot of Singaram on the seashore, looking out, as he waits for a group of people to arrive with a marriage proposal for Anandhi; the camera positions the spectator along with him. At the end of the film, even as many in the locality turn against Anandhi and Kavita, Singaram goes against this opposition. He accepts Anandhi's relationship and supports the couple's decision to leave together for the city. Thus, these films formally flesh out how subjective journeys cannot be extricated from the local settings and relational networks in which these stories unfold. There might not be a public in the cinema hall, and our viewing of these films may be in the isolation of our bedrooms or through the bubbles we put into place through headphones and screen immersion in crowded space. Still, these recent small-budget films that often cross the boundaries of documentary, autobiography and fiction are invested in exploring dense community networks that make and break its protagonists.[9]

At the current juncture of technological shifts, accelerated by the pandemic, we also see the OTT release of *Halal Love Story* (dir: Zakariya Mohammad; 2020) and *C U Soon* (dir: Mahesh Narayanan; 2020), films that explore the role of media technologies in the configuration of intimacy. The significance of many of these films is that they zoom out and reflect on how idioms of romance are produced and circulated by technological forms, such as cinema, home videos and mobile phone apps. Rather than as mere reflections on the present scenario, we could read these films as belated acknowledgements of the fact that the screen has changed; it is not just smaller, it facilitates two-way communication. Therefore, cinemas about heterosexual relations need to be read side-by-side with new productions on queer desire, because they share common

Fig. 7: Frame grab from *Kattumaram*. Image courtesy of author
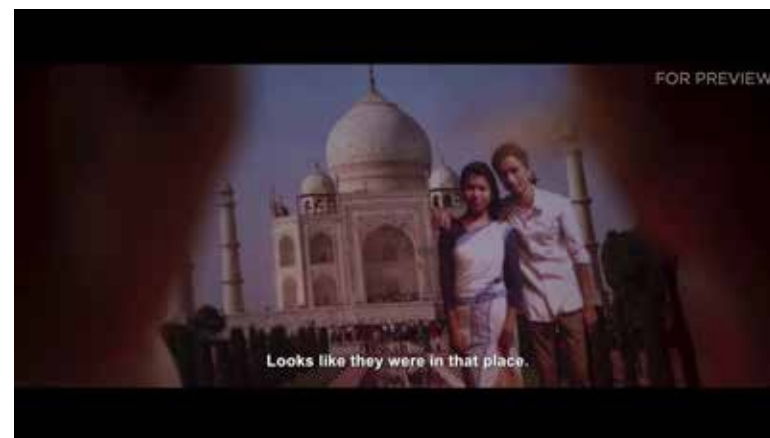

Fig. 8: Frame grab from *Bulbul can Sing*. Image courtesy of author

Fig. 9: Frame grab from *C U Soon*. Image courtesy of author

ground that points to how technological forms put into circulation idioms of desire. Interactive technologies—mobile phone cameras, social networking apps, digital cameras—play a formative role in the staging of intimacy in *Kattumaram* and *Bulbul can Sing* as well as recent films like *C U Soon*.

IN THE COMPANY OF OTHERS

In multiple accounts of women's film festivals and queer film festivals from varied global contexts, the emphasis is to tap into the capacity of cinema to assemble a collective. Histories of film viewing, as a charged and embodied activity, enter into the choice of location of queer film festivals—e.g., the use of Liberty Theatre as a venue for Kashish Mumbai International Queer Film Festival since 2014. In 2017, Dialogues: Calcutta International LGBT Film and Video Festival, organised by Sappho for Equality in Kolkata, moved to Basusree Cinema, one of the few remaining single-screen cinema halls in Kolkata. But the permissibility of queer film festivals in India happens mainly in the larger social canvas in which the erotic-scapes of low-budget cinema theatres are fast disappearing, and therefore these screening spaces are mostly sanitised spaces (Mokkil, 2018: 11). Mainstream festivals, such as IFFI and MAMI, and queer film festivals at present function as exceptional spaces where these films are watched in the company of others. In most cases we encounter many of these digitally produced films at home or on small

screens, rather than in theatres even prior to the lockdown. Various technologies—DVDs, downloads, SD cards, OTT platforms—have made it possible for these new forms of queer cinema to reach a wide network of viewers. Rather than plotting this shift solely within the narrative of nostalgia for the physical space of theatres and the collective modes of viewing associated with it, we need to place these new forms of queer cinema as gesturing towards another phase of interaction and publicness. Multiple cultural productions from this period of the lockdown allow us to reflect on how such mediums as cinema and theatre redefine conceptions of collectivity, often through changing aesthetic practices and spectator positioning.

Mohit Takalkar's *The Colour of Loss*,[10] a recent theatre production that was first screened online on 2 October 2020, allows us to explore the creative process through which theatre reinvents itself for digital screening in the pandemic. This hour-long online performance is an adaptation of Han Kang's *The White Book* (2016) that engages with the overwhelming power of grief, loss and mourning. Four women in four separate windows face viewers, staring at them intently. The screen evokes the insistent close-up views of Zoom and Google Meet interfaces, on which many of us have spent time during the lockdown, our faces mirrored back at us amidst the boxes of other unanchored faces. In *The Colour of Loss*, the bodies of two sisters are conjured up on screen—one dead, the other alive—conjoined through the embodied memories of their mother. What holds us as viewers is the transfusion between the boxes. The ghostly breath of an infant sister that literally fills the lungs of the living sister; a white handkerchief that falls from one window and slowly lands like a benediction in the other window. As these women narrate their stories of grief and loss, every twitch of their faces looms large before us. The colours and textures of their memories bleed through the borders of the digital screen.

I watched the screening of this performance online on 28 October 2020 as part of the Ranga Shankara Theatre Festival, and the experience of the viewing lingered on through the following day. The brittle recollection of the vision of an infant swaddled in white; the crunchy taste of sugar cubes; a gleaming mound of rice cakes— this digital rumination on the colour white, as beckoning towards the persistence of grief and tenacity of life, could have touched varied spectators as they stayed cocooned in their own viewing spaces.

Fig. 10: Screenshot of the rehearsal of *The Colour of Loss*.
Source: https://www.thehindu.com/entertainment/theatre/mohit-takalkars-play-the-colour-
of-loss-to-be-staged-digitally-on-october-2/article32741914.ece

Yet, as long as this desire to touch and feel each other's emotions remains with us, are we not continually reaching out towards the tentative possibility of connections and collectives?[11]

Can our entry into scenes of love and longing, mourning and memory ever be completely in isolation? Do we not walk into scenographies of intimacy bearing the impression of other encounters—past and present? Even as we withdraw to the isolation of our bounded walls and sit in sanitised rooms in front of our digital screens, do practices of viewership always place us in the company of others? These questions are of significance to all scenes of viewing—whether on the large screen in public or in private viewing conditions.[12] The lockdown forces us to confront these questions anew as we are positioned within the constraints and physical distancing put into place for the management of life. But these processes of individuation and categorisation have been part and parcel of contemporary modes of governance. The collective

forms of filmmaking and the entangled worlds that are opened within queer cinema in the last decade also need to be seen as responses that disrupt technologies of governance and surveillance through individuation, enumeration and categorisation. As the boundaries between the private and the public are further redefined with the proliferation of digital technologies, cinema's explorations of intimacy have also changed in response to shifting modalities of reception. The malleability and reinvention of the form bears witness to the changing visions of collectivity, belonging and relationality—for cinema, like politics, can never exist in the evacuation of a public.

◆

NOTES

1. See Berlant and Warner (1998) for a discussion on the counter impulses within the discourses around sexuality and public culture. On the one hand, there are multiple mechanisms in place through which certain normative forms of sexuality acquire public recognition. On the other, there is an erasure of the public in sex when 'sexuality seems like a property of subjectivity rather than a publicly or counterpublicly accessible culture' (ibid.: 560). These contradictions around sex, as both public and intensely private, is one that is of much significance to sexuality politics today.

2. These films were produced and distributed primarily in theatrical format, shot on 35 mm film, and displayed in adult cinemas scattered across Japan.

3. See Schoonover and Galt (2016) and Kuzniar (2005) for discussions on the global circuits of queer cinema. Kuzniar observes that queer cinema unsettles schematised conceptions of gender and sexuality.

4. https://www.deccanchronicle.com/entertainment/mollywood/200218/less-told-tales-of-a-transman.html.

5. http://globalindianstories.com/index.php/2019/06/28/swarnavel-eswarans-first-feature-film-kattumaram-gets-a-standing-ovation-at-bfi-during-liff-2019/.

6. http://ektaracollective.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Collectivising-cinema_article-on-ektara.pdf.

7. http://ektaracollective.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Collectivising-cinema_article-on-ektara.pdf.

8. https://scroll.in/reel/853800/in-turup-chess-politics-social-tensions-and-a-film-made-by-committee.

9. A range of films such as *Ek Ladki ko Dekha to Aisa Laga* (dir: Shelly Chopra Dhar; 2019), *Yeh Freedom Life* (dir: Priya Sen; 2018) and *Super Deluxe* (dir: Thiagarajan Kumararaja; 2019) that differ in aesthetic forms and modes of production, exhibition and reception seem to have one common strand. They all explore practices of inhabiting space, and position queer lives and desires within dense networks of a specific location.

10. This is the short description of the play from the official site: 'The play is a lyrical and disquieting exploration of personal grief, written through the prism of the colour white. While on a writer's residency, a nameless narrator wanders the twin white worlds of the blank page and snowy Warsaw. The play becomes a meditation on the colour white, as well as a fictional journey inspired by an older sister who died in her mother's arms, a few hours old.' https://insider.in/the-colour-of-loss-oct2-2020/event.

11. The director Mohit Takalkar relates the play to the affective terrains of the present when we are made acutely aware of the fragility of life. https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/art-and-culture/to-a-world-devastated-by-covid-award-wining-pune-director-brings-a-performance-on-death-and-loss-6635913/.

12. On collective feelings, the archive of emotions and the impressions left by others, see Cvetkovich (2003) and Ahmed (2004).

REFERENCES

Ahmad, Ali Nobil. 2016. 'Introduction', in Ali Khan and Ali Nobil Ahmad (eds.), *Cinema and Society: Film and Social Change in Pakistan*. Karachi, Pakistan: Oxford University Press: 3–24.

Ahmed, Sara. 2004. 'Collective Feelings or the Impressions Left by Others', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21 (2): 25–42.

Arnold, Michael John. 2015. 'Sex Every Afternoon: Pink Film and the Body of Pornographic Cinema in Japan'. PhD dissertation. University of Michigan.

Athique, Adrian and Douglas Hill. 2014. *The Multiplex in India: A Cultural Economy of Urban Leisure*. Oxford: Routledge.

Berlant, Lauren and Michael Warner. 1998. 'Sex in Public', *Critical Inquiry*, 24 (2): 547–66.

Cvetkovitch, Ann. 2003. *An Archive of Feelings*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Damiens, Antoine. 2020. *LGBTQ Film Festivals: Curating Queerness*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

Dass, Manishita. 2015. *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity, and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dawson, Leanne. 2015. 'Queer European Cinema: Queering Cinematic Time and Space', *Studies in European Cinema*, 12 (3): 185–204.

Gopinath, Gayatri. 2005. *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ghosh, Shohini. 2010. 'The Wonderful World of Queer Cinephelia', *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies,* 1 (1): 17–20.

Hoek, Lotte. 2020. 'When Celluloid Pornography went Digital: Class and Race in the Bangladeshi Cut-piece Online', *Porn Studies*, 7 (1): 97–114.

———. 2013. *Cut-Pieces: Celluloid Obscenity and Popular Cinema in Bangladesh*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Jameela, Nalini. 2018. *Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker*. Trans. Reshma Bharadwaj. NOIDA: Om Books.

Kuzniar, A. Alice. 2005. *The Queer German Cinema*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Mazzarella, William. 2013. *Censorium: Cinema and the Open Edge of Mass Publicity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mini, Darshana Sreedhar. 2019. 'The Rise of Soft Porn in Malayalam Cinema and the Precarious Stardom of Shakeela', *Feminist Media Histories*, 5 (2): 49–82.

Murtagh, Ben. 2013. *Genders and Sexualities in Indonesian Cinema: Constructing Gay, Lesbi, and Waria Identities on Screen*. New York: Routledge.

Mokkil, Navaneetha. 2019. *Unruly Figures: Queerness, Sex Work and the Politics of Sexuality in Kerala*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

———. 2018. 'Queer Encounters: Film Festivals and the Sensual Circuits of European Cinema in India', *Studies in European Cinema*, 15 (1): 85–100.

Mulvey, Laura. 2005. *Death 24 x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion.

Schoonover, Karl and Rosalind Galt. 2016. *Queer Cinema in the World*. Durham; London: Duke University Press.

Srinivas, S. V. 2000. 'Is There a Public in the Cinema Hall?', *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, 42.

Vaidehi. 2006. *Gulabi Talkies and other Stories*. Ed. and trans. Tejaswini Niranjana. New Delhi: Penguin Books.

❖❖

ARCHIVE 'STORIES'
Indian Film Memorabilia in the Age
of New Media Public

SPANDAN
BHATTACHARYA

In her memoir, renowned Indian writer and scholar Nabaneeta Dev Sen shared some of her memories of the allure of picture plates of famous film actors and actresses in the books and periodicals spread across the library and study of her father Narendra Deb,[1] a prominent poet and essayist of early 20th-century Bengal.[2] In another account, former Bengali film actress Monica Guha-Thakurta shared her experiences as an aspiring actress, and recollected how the picture plates of film stars published in the film and literary journals of her childhood in the 1930s and 1940s shaped her notion of the film world.[3]

I begin with these two instances as the entry point to my paper which aims to record my journey through the world of documentation, archives and records of early Indian film culture, because they, in a way, engaged with some important aspects of cinema and its sensorium[4] by individuals who were associated with the film world, but yet not so directly connected to it. These are aspects of Indian film history with which, unfortunately, our state archives and the official discourse of Indian cinema failed to engage. From August 2016 to July 2020, I worked (first as a research assistant for a book project on Bombay cinema and then as a post-doctoral fellow at Jadavpur University) in various archives in New Delhi and Kolkata, and was also able to view some personal collections. In these 'encounters' with documents, texts, library and archive catalogues and other kinds of resources, through meetings with individuals in charge of archives, and discussions with fellow researchers and scholars, I was intrigued with how newer approaches, initiatives and efforts by institutes, groups

and individuals intervened in the existing patterns of established film archives.

This short piece is designed to reflect on my experiences from these encounters and some newer findings (if they may be called thus), and possible routes to look beyond that which Ranita Chatterjee terms as 'the boundaries of received film history'.[5] Fortunately, over the last few years, scholarships are being offered to study newer methodologies and perspectives in film archival research. The work on the 'pin up'[6] as a cultural text in the West focuses on how, along with cinematic formation, the print and other media intersections must be taken note of (Bonapfel, 2015; Palm, 2018). Coming to the Indian context, Madhuja Mukherjee's (2014) and Sudhir Mahadevan's (2016) methodology in moving from the 'nationalist' framework of Indian cinema scholarship, which shows the circulation and functioning of apparatus and image culture within a trans-national network, has widened our archival research perspective. Chatterjee writes that if, on the one hand, the lacunae in the national film archive made it difficult to produce anything more than 'a broad overview of early cinema in India', an engagement with other public archives and personal collections may lead to 'an alluring range of possibilities' (2014: 30).

Arindam Saha Sardar, a photographer and documentary film maker based in Uttarpara, West Bengal, recounted how he became an archivist quite by accident.[7] His story (in his words: *amar archivist hoye other galpo*) refers to the aftermath of the Nandigram violence[8] in West Bengal, when he decided to video-document various sites of resistance towards state violence put up by common people, political activists, and a few groups of local artists and performers. During his shoots in and around Nandigram, he met with Ashok Chakraborty, Adinath Das, among others associated with the music and film industries of West Bengal, and from the field of performance. He learnt that there were numerous disc records, old books, catalogues, music booklets and rare documents languishing in personal collections, which he then began to collect and store. While interviewing Subir Sen, Sardar had an opportunity to collect, restore and archive personal family albums and some bromide prints that were about 100 years old. These newer findings piqued his curiosity about the print and visual culture in and around the field of performance and cinema, inspiring him to look

for old magazines, booklets, posters and other publicity materials in personal collections.

In a few years, Sardar set up the Jiban Smriti Archive with a collection of numerous disc records, more than 8,000 periodicals, about 12,000 photographs of different kinds, more than 700 letters and 96 paintings by reputed artists.[9] Situated in Uttarpara, the Archive provides opportunities to engage with print formations about cinema in its early period, as also to view these formations along with the vibrant culture of newspapers, magazines and photography in the early 20th century.

Early cinema scholarship demonstrates that the phenomenon of cinema did not merely emerge as a new medium, but realigned, reformulated and transformed the public sphere (Hansen, 1991; Hake, 1993; Gunning, 1994; Fehrenbach, 1995; Gilloch, 2007). From the advent of columns on film writing and with the popularity of images of actors and actresses, the print culture in India entered a new phase in which the intermediality and dialogues between print, the visual and the cinematic led to numerous genres, leading to an overall transformation in the print public sphere. The Jiban Smriti Archive holds some literary and theatre magazines in which the circuit of theatre and print meet cinema and the cinematic.

In this context, *Nachghar,* an early 1920s Bengali magazine, edited by Hemendra Kumar Roy and Premankur Atarthi, was significant. In its early editions, *Nachghar*[10] was an important formation in not only offering a 'taste of cinema' to its target readers, primarily imagined as theatre-lovers, but also for providing a model of film discussion. The editors of *Nachghar* were known for their interest in film and photography, and brought a form of dialogue between the photographic, the theatrical and the cinematic in theatre-review columns.[11] In the first year, *Nachghar*'s fourth issue carried an elaborate review of Sisir Bhaduri's famous play, *Alamgir*, along with photographs of Bhaduri in the role of Alamgir. The photographs by reputed photographer T. P. Sen were laid out in such a manner that the reader, in successive steps, could 'see' the change of expressions in Bhaduri's close-up shots. Along with an intense discussion of the play, these photographs highlighted the enactment of a performance. The caption beneath the first photograph reads: 'I saw that my soul is coming out of my body.' The second one reads, 'Say, but I'm afraid to listen.' This juxtaposition of photographs of

actors enacting a scene in successive steps, presented with written dialogue, could be compared to the experience of the cinematic.[12] This practice of *Nachghar* was aligned with print genres, such as the photo narrative, and with some advertisements in contemporary newspapers.[13] But, perhaps, this could also be seen in accordance with the popularity of the film medium and the experience of the 'cinematic'. An important document like *Nachghar* remained outside the collection of not just the National Film Archive, but other major institutional archives as well. Fortunately, such 'parallel archives' as Jiban Smriti give the early cinema researcher an opportunity to engage with some of these magazines.

This intervention—and the importance of *Nachghar*—needs to be contextualised in similar formations in print, which, again, lie unattended in some personal collections. Monica Guha-Thakurta's personal collection of photographs, albums, paper cuttings and her narrative recounting widened my perspective. In the 1920s, film and theatre actor and director Dhirendranath Gangopadhyay (Monica Guha-Thakurta's father, popularly known as DG in Bengali film circuits) produced a similar play of the photographic and the cinematic in print when he photographed himself enacting different roles across gender, class and age groups in varied attire, make up and looks. He published these photo albums in the early to mid-1920s as books titled *Bhaber Abhibyakti* (Expression of Emotions)*, Rang Berang* (Multi-coloured), *Phulshajya* (Bed of Flowers), *Bhalobasa* (Love), etc.[14] These series were shot at a studio based in Hyderabad. He published a total of eight books with Sishir Publishing House in College Street. Guha-Thakurta's personal collection of these rare photo albums showcases DG's innovation, and make up and lighting expertise.[15]

These formations are important in demonstrating the intermedial dialogue between the visual, the performative and the literal or the print. One can observe how these intermedial dialogues actively formed a domain of the extra-filmic, where filmic ideas and imaginations were mediated and translated for the reading public. Here, one has to remember that writing on cinema emerged in Bengal and other regions of India at a point when there were massive transformations in the public sphere, and newly emerged industries (print, music, film) had a role in 'making' and/or imagining the cinematic. These transformations in the text and visual culture of the print public sphere not only created new forms and aesthetics, but

also led to new dialogues with the popular visual art and art market in contemporary Calcutta.

In 1926, artist and photographer Bhavani Charan Law published a series of photographs of women models (mostly in sensuous postures) in the form of a book titled *Shobha*.[16]
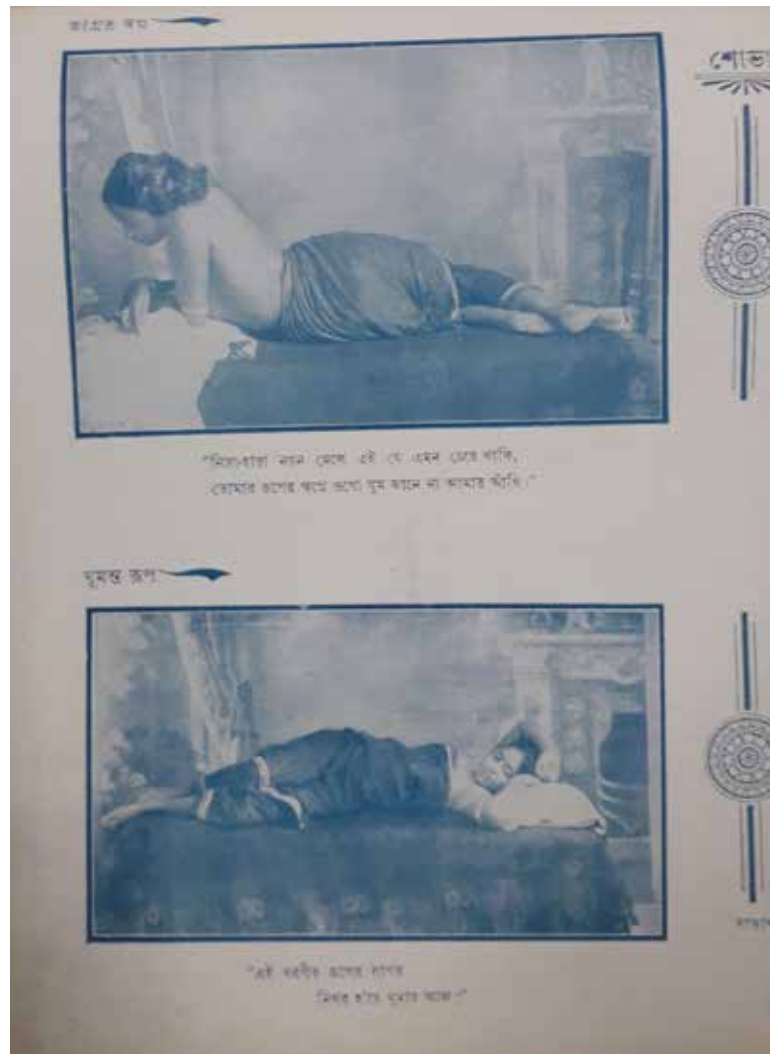
Shobha by Bhavani Charan Law, 1926. Image courtesy of National Library, Kolkata

The pictures of these women accompanied by couplets of Rabindranath Tagore's poetry in *Shobha* could be seen as a template provided by print for photographing and printing images of film actresses in film periodicals. In the early 1930s, the bilingual (Bengali and English) film magazine *Dipali* followed *Shobha's* template, while capturing the leisurely mood of the actress. One particular photograph of Miss Lolita, published in the new year issue of *Dipali* in 1935, depicted postures and poses similar to those in *Shobha*. Its caption states: '*Bombay-er Ajanta Cinetone-er Sukh-swapno Bivora Sundari Abhinetri*' (the beautiful actress of Bombay's Ajanta Cinetone is absorbed in her dream). The template of the sleeping woman lying on the couch, already present in *Shobha*, was reworked by later film magazines. But, more important, the images in *Shobha* were in themselves indicative of the encounter of the 'cinematic' in Bengali print culture. Some of the photographs in *Shobha* showed conversations between two female figures in domestic spaces, with captions carrying many similarities with (silent) film inter-titles. It is also interesting to observe how *Shobha* and similar print formations (the albums published by DG, for instance) worked towards providing visual idioms and patterns to portray film actresses. Sushil Chatterjee's personal collection is another, with many similar photographs of early Bengali film actresses and some models (posing for artists), which further demonstrates the manner in which the contemporary art and photography world in Bengal, and some of its patterns, were contributing to cinematic imaginations for the print public sphere.

A researcher dependent on state archives would very well be aware of film magazines and their world of texts and visuals, but the archival limitations cited earlier would restrict the researcher to contextualising other similar formations in the broader context of the art market such as periodicals, photo album publications and print advertisements. Consequently, it has become important for film historical research to look beyond what the 'archive stories' have so far been and to take note of these parallel sites, and to record and document the experience of such collectors as Sushil Chatterjee, erstwhile film personalities like Monica Guha-Thakurta, or young archivists like Arindam Saha Sardar. But limited funds, the absence of state support and academic acknowledgement have made most of these collections unavailable to the public. Guha-Thakurta's personal

collection was fortunately restored, catalogued and digitised by the Archive of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (CSSSC), Calcutta, in November 2020. But Saha Sardar in his interview said that the absence of state funds and lack of academic interest have made things difficult for him. Sushil Chatterjee's death some months ago raises questions as to who would now look after his rare collection of film magazines, photographs and other possessions.[17]

Along with such personal collections and records, there have been restoration attempts by some university departments across India. For instance, Media Lab, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, has catalogued and digitised some collections of film magazines from various personal possessions. The library of the School of Arts and Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, has digitised Rudrajit Mukherjee's collection of Bengali film posters. There may be other kinds of archival efforts currently at work as well. Incidentally, along with the realisation of the limits of the state film archive, in recent years there has been renewed interest by media organisations and entrepreneurs towards moving image archiving in India. Various private bodies and entrepreneurs are now interested in film archives and in archiving film posters, booklets and other memorabilia. This has been reflected in several ways: the emergence of various social media pages sharing early film memorabilia images; a growing interest in heritage organisations and by individual collectors to design websites for film ephemera (*Cinemaazi*, New Delhi); exhibitions organised by Indian art studios (Art galleries, e.g., Chemould, Gallery 88) for public access. As these collectors, curators and organisations collect, restore and digitise material, and increase public access, the reuse of moving image archives leads to new sets of questions of documentation, fan culture, film memory and film history narrative.

Cinemaazi is one such organisation which has emerged very recently. Demonstrating much effort and investment in archiving moving image culture in India, it is managed and operated by NHP Centre, a not-for-profit body registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. *Cinemaazi* claims to be the:

> first of its kind not-for-profit private sector enterprise to develop
> a digital repository and open encyclopaedic resources to chronicle
> and preserve the rich history and heritage of Hindi, Assamese,

Bengali, Gujarati, Garhwali, Kannada, Konkani, Malayalam, Manipuri, Marathi, Punjabi, Tamil, Telugu and other regional cinemas; document the extraordinary legacies of its people and films, and archive their rich contribution; exhibit the exquisite and colourful cinema memorabilia from the in-house collection of the founders of *Cinemaazi*; recount the spectacular journey of Indian cinema and its people, through digital content in multimedia format—articles, video and photo essays, interviews, reviews, timelines—authored by historians, scholars and experts; *rekindle memories and create nostalgia; crowdsource memories and memorabilia; and engage and entertain the readers, viewers and listeners*.[18]

From my visit to the *Cinemaazi* archive in January 2020 and interactions with its founder Sumant Batra, co-founder Asha Batra, and the team, I discovered *Cinemaazi*'s innovative engagement with archival resources and its access to a wider media public. The memory of Indian cinema and the affective registers of film nostalgia shape, in a manner, various activities of *Cinemaazi*. And unlike the personal collections of Chatterjee and Saha Sardar, or university and institutional attempts at archiving, creating new media texts from old film memorabilia is important (e.g., Instagram quiz, video essays on YouTube, the *Cinemaazi* website). Furthermore, the focus on entertainment has given a new dimension to its archival approach. Consequently, in addition to finding material from possible places, the actual presentation of content, and story creation about that content, have been seen as more important. Such a focus on content creation and story building exercises defines the identity of this new archive and is its driving force.

In this context I would like to briefly discuss memory as a driving force in these new archives, vis-à-vis the scholarship on memory studies and the role of new media platforms and imagined media public. Memory studies scholarships have demonstrated how memory has taken part in contemporary times in shaping our social belonging or cultural imagination, individual desire or group activities. Memory, simply seen as a recording of 'what happened', has already been problematised, and the general belief regarding memory—that it is unchanging, and only its value changes in different periods—has been questioned in memory studies. This scholarship shows how memory can work as a 'text

to be deciphered' and not always an (unchanged) 'lost reality to be rediscovered' (Huyssen, 1995). Moving further, Huyssen explains memory's role in capturing us, rather than memory's subjection to our recapture. Memory, and the remembrance of the 'lost cinematic past', are central to the *Cinemaazi* archive and many other social media pages (about early Indian cinema) which have emerged in recent times. At one point, the memory of the 'lost cinematic past' as a driving force positions nostalgia as a central element in the way film memorabilia are presented on these websites. This has also aestheticised the entire engagement with the filmic past. This is how these archives and archival efforts, in my opinion, engage in creating a story from what is available/accessible, and approach film texts that are presented with several mediations (organisational, technological, etc.) to a wider public. Along with *Cinemaazi*, other art galleries across Indian cities have shown interest in aestheticising film memorabilia for a wider public.

An exhibition about early Bengali film actress Kanan Devi, held at Gallery 88, Kolkata, in 2019 (curated by Jigisha Bhattacharya), could be seen as an exemplary text of how an arrangement of Kanan Devi's family photographs, accessed from her relatives, presented along with a curatorial note on her star persona, created a 'story' of an early actress for an art gallery public. These mediations and mediatisation, if one may call it thus, makes a complex media text from the archived images and objects of the contemporary period.

On the one hand, these archival initiatives make new bodies of film memorabilia accessible to a wider media public, which has broadened the possibility of early cinema research in numerous new directions. On the other, these efforts and investments are reflective of various aspects of the new media scene in India, and one can see how a new way of engagement with cinema sensorium has taken place in creating fresh content from early cinema material. Moreover, social media pages such as 'Colonial Zamemedar', 'Film History Pic', etc. (on Facebook and Instagram, respectively), create numerous posts sharing early film memorabilia images. This sharing and comments by followers and subscribers to these pages generate newer forms of engagement with film memorabilia by new media public. 'Film History Pic' often shares old film memorabilia and presents a story alongside (by giving details of when the image was taken and other such information), which creates an affect centring on a particular film star or moment from Indian film history. Whereas 'Colonial Zamemedar', by creating memes from old film publicity images, etc., plays around with film ephemera and gives new dimensions to an iconic film image, constructing newer connotation of that image in the domain of new media public. In the post-pandemic phase, virtual platforms have seen a record increase in the visibility of film memorabilia, including the use of these images as GIFs and memes. These newer usages, accesses and appropriations of film memorabilia from film archives indicate how the cinema sensorium works in newer registers in contemporary times.

Historical research on the cinema and print public sphere in various languages across the world in the 19th and 20th century has explored several threads of inquiry into the study of the reading public and the manner of their engagement with the popular imagination of films. The scholarship on early cinema and print media in India has demonstrated how the imagination of a national cultural identity played an important role in film writings. The scholarship, which specifically studies early cinema and print culture in pre- and post-independence India, focuses on the nationalist mobilisation and cultural authority of Indian elites, and demonstrates their central role in imagining the cinematic public sphere and writing an Indian film history.[19] In that light we can attempt to read the usages, accesses and appropriations of film memorabilia by virtual platforms in contemporary times, and what they tell us about the present imagination of early films. These new archival attempts are intervening in the old modes of film history practiced by state archives and are trying to form a new pattern of writing Indian film history. Drawing from Partha Chatterjee and Anjan Ghosh (2002), I believe that in the writing of this Indian film history, these archives (digital repositories of film memorabilia, and their contents and stories) also take part in 'making' an Indian film historical past in the public.[20] Chatterjee observes that while writing a history of the past, if the ways of writing 'are inextricably entangled in the ideologies of the historian's present, is not the historian, by "doing" history, also participating in the "making" of it?' (2002: 12). For the reason that in this history writing by new film archives the 'present' is strongly present—which is the 'present' of the new media reality—perhaps this new historical awareness and historicising of Indian cinema in the contemporary moment not only indicates the

transformation of the archival approach to Indian cinema, but also narrates a reality of a 'new media scene'.

◆

NOTES

1. This memoir was read by her daughter Nandana Sen at the first Narendra Deb Memorial Lecture at Jadavpur University, 28 September 2019.

2. Along with a few other essayists and writers such as Sourindra Mohon Mukhopadhyay, Hemendra Kumar Roy, and others, he pioneered writings about cinema in the vernacular and was known for his excellent collection of film books and periodicals from the West. In his book *Cinema: Chhayar Mayar Bichitra Rahasya* (which is considered to be the one of first books about cinema in Indian vernacular), he refers to a long list of books and magazines. He once ran a Cinema Library at 140, Cornwalish Street in Calcutta, which had books like J. Richmond's *Hollywood* and Fredrick Talbot's *Screen Technique*, among others.

3. Author's interview with Monica Guha-Thakurta, 15 February 2020.

4. Miriam Hansen's study of Hollywood as vernacular modernism points out that Hollywood did not just circulate images and sounds; it also produced and globalised a new sensorium (1999). Here, I am borrowing the term from Hansen's understanding of cinema as a phenomenon in the early 20th century.

5. See R. Chatterjee (2014). The 'boundaries of received film history' could both be a result of censorship/specific restoration policies/disciplinary measures or methodological gaps/difficulties in access, or both feeding into one another, leading to wider gaps in archiving Indian film history. But along with that, I believe there are some boundaries of the very discipline of Film Studies/Cinema Studies and some dominating frameworks in Indian cinema research which are also responsible for certain gaps in our film archives. For instance, film-related publications, various kinds of media texts, picture plates, post cards, film publicity booklets, posters, etc., are not dealt with with the seriousness which they deserve. Film historical research often tended to use these research objects merely as sites to discuss the journey of cinema or compensate the gap in film history (if the film print is lost, then publicity materials are used to write about the film).

6. Pin-up is defined as a photograph, a clipping or a drawing, usually of sexualised women figures, affixed to a board or wall. According to the Webster's 2002 definition, the pin-up is an image of an individual meant for display and concentrated observation.

7. Author's interview with Arindam Saha Sardar, 16 November 2020.

8. Nandigram is an assembly constituency in the East Medinipur district of the Indian state of West Bengal. In 2007, in the aftermath of a failed project by the Government of West Bengal to acquire land for a special economic zone, the area experienced massive resistance against land acquisition, police firing and state violence, leading to the death of a large number of protestors.

9. Author's interview with Arindam Saha Sardar, 16 November 2020.

10. *Nachghar* began operation on 26th Boisakh of 1331 BS and was publicised as 'a weekly magazine of theatre, bioscope, dance and fine arts'. The editors further pointed out that 'this magazine will never contain or encourage any political discussion'.

11. In its later issues, the periodical invested in forming a close community of theatre lovers and readers by maintaining an informal way of writing 'insider's accounts' about the 'theatre *para*' (theatre neighbourhood): news of upcoming productions, who would act in which play, etc. And after the setting up of Madan Theatre in Calcutta, regular columns of *Nachghar* (like 'Rangarenu' or 'Natya Jagat') started engaging with varied information regarding films being produced at Calcutta or to be released soon at a theatre in Calcutta. The formation of a theatre-loving community within the broader reading public of Bengal eventually became a community interested in cinema news: information and gossip, film reviews, film education. The topics range from the blackmarketing of tickets at Madan Theatre, to whom Hollywood stars like Valentino or Ramon Novarro were dating. But along with these, the pages also engaged in articulating certain desires about what to 'expect' from indigenous films.

12. Earlier or contemporary theatre magazines in their theatre review columns usually highlighted the actor and director in framed profile shots, rarely including actors' faces and body postures in documenting the 'enactment'. Whereas Bhaduri's *Nachghar* shots provided the detail and nuance of the facial changes in his emotions. The parallel projection of these faces on the same page created a photo narrative.

13. For instance, the Horlicks and Capstan advertisements in *Amrita Bazar Patrika* relied on this mode.

14. For details, see Guha-Thakurta (2015).

15. Author's interview with Monica Guha-Thakurta, 15 February 2020. Guha-Thakurta further confirmed that these photo albums were very popular as marriage gifts in the 1920s and 1930s.

16. *Shobha*'s photographs were influenced by the British realist school of model photography in which the passivity of the model, the smooth transition from dark to light tones and curtained backgrounds were all important elements.

17. In a *Firstpost* interview, when Chatterjee was asked the fate of his treasures once he was no more and to whom they would be bequeathed, he said with disappointment: 'Not to the government, for sure. The system is full of dishonest people.' His wife had been struggling with a mental illness for the past 15 years, and in that context he added: 'I want my son to take care of her first and after that, if he feels it is required, to preserve his father's passion...else, the objects will find their next possessor on their own.'

18. See the *Cinemaazi* website. www.cinemaazi.com. Italics mine.

19. For instance, Moinak Biswas has argued that 'articulating the local/vernacular literatures' in film writing during the early period became a way of modernisation in many parts of India (1999). Manishita Dass has pointed out that in film writing and film criticism published in Bengali periodicals from 1913 to the 1940s, the aesthetic project was driven and determined by a deep and continuing dissatisfaction with the contemporary Indian cinema and its public (2015). While Dass demonstrates how in film writing national fantasies converged with media fantasies, Biswas observes how literary taste played a major role in defining a regional character in contemporary film culture.

20. Here, I draw from Partha Chatterjee's introductory essay in *History and the Present* (Chatterjee and Ghosh, 2002: 12). Chatterjee discusses how 'by doing' history one also takes part in 'making' that history.

REFERENCES

Bonapfel, Elizabeth M. 2015. 'Reading Publicity Photographs through the Elizabeth Robins Archive: How Images of the Actress and the Queen Constructed a New Sexual Ideal', *Theatre Survey,* 57 (1), American Society for Theatre Research.

Biswas, Moinak. 1999. 'Bengali Film Debate: Literary Liaison Revisited', *Journal of the Moving Image,* Department of Film Studies, Kolkata: Jadavpur University.

Chatterjee, Partha and Anjan Ghosh (eds.). 2002. *History and the Present*. Delhi: Permanent Black.

Chatterjee, Ranita. 2014. 'Film History through Fragments: The Aurora Archive and the Transnational Travels of Early Indian Cinema', *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*, 5 (1), 4 September.

Dass, Manishita. 2015. *Outside the Lettered City: Cinema, Modernity and the Public Sphere in Late Colonial India.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Fehrenbach, Heide. 1995. 'German Discourses on Cinema, Modernity, and Identity', *German Politics and Society,* Winter, 13 (4).

Ghose, Amita. 2017. 'World War I Collectibles, Priceless Antiques Line this Nonagenarian's Kolkata Home', 11 November. https://www.firstpost.com/living/past-perfect-world-war-i-collectibles-priceless-antiques-line-this-nonagenarians-kolkata-home-4204293.html.

Gilloch, Graeme. 2007. 'Urban Optics: Film, Phantasmagoria and the City in Benjamin and Kracauer', *New Formations*, Summer, 61.

Guha-Thakurta, Monica. 2015. *Periye Elam Antabihin Path*. New Delhi: IMH.

Gunning, Tom. 1994. 'The Whole Town's Gawking: Early Cinema and the Visual Experience of Modernity', *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, 7 (2), 1 January.

Hake, Sabine. 1993. *The Cinema's Third Machine: Writing on Film in Germany, 1907–1933*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press.

Hansen, Miriam. 1999. 'The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism', *Modernism/Modernity*, 6 (2), Johns Hopkins University Press, April.

———. 1991. 'Decentric Perspectives: Kracauer's Early Writings on Film and Mass Culture', *New German Critique*, 54, Special Issue on Siegfried Kracauer, Autumn.

Huyssen, Andreas. 1995. *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia.* New York: Routledge.

Mahadevan, Sudhir. 2016. *A Very Old Machine: The Many Origins of the Cinema in India.* NY: State University of New York Press.

Mukherjee, Madhuja. 2014. 'Of Bhadramohila, Blouses, and "Bustofine": Re-viewing Bengali High Culture (1930–1940) from a Low Angle', in Clara Sarmento and Ricardo Campos (eds.), *Popular and Visual Culture: Design, Circulation and Consumption.* Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Palm, Regina. 2018. 'All American Girls: Women Pin-Up Artists of the First Half of the Twentieth Century', *Journal of Popular Culture,* 51 (5), October.

❖❖

THROUGH CHARULATA'S OPERA GLASS
Re-viewing the Cinema-Effect

JENSON JOSEPH

One can think of two broad approaches to understanding the shift to the contemporary post-celluloid times and its effects, both engaging with the theme: What did cinema's status as the central cultural institution during most of the last century mean to us, and what are the implications of the end-of-the-era of cinema? One approach, exemplified in the field of film studies, is to explore the industrial–cultural modes and practices of cinema and their effects by narrowing down the scope of its enquiry specifically to cinema and cultures around it. Let us call it the cinema-centric approach. A second approach, proposed in certain desirable traditions of media studies, probes cinema and its effects by placing them within a larger history of media effects. We could call this the media studies approach to cinema. While the cinema-centric approach is defined by its zooming in on the era of the cultural dominance of cinema and its social-political implications, the media studies approach calls for a zooming out, prompting us to take a broader historical view so as to grasp cinema's place in the shaping of the era of its dominance.

One of the best examples in the first tradition is Ashish Rajadhyaksha's book (2009). A remarkable achievement in capturing the era of the dominance of celluloid cinema, it is told from the perspective of the experience of Indian cinema, discussing in meticulous detail the public import and social usage of the moving image in its varied dimensions in most parts of the world. The 'time of celluloid', mentioned in the title of the book, corresponds to the historical period that coincides with the reign of the modern state—the dominance of both these institutions considered to have

come to an end globally now. In fact, the transactions between the 20th-century state and the apparatus of cinema is the book's central thematic. In this article, my attempt is to take up for discussion the concept of 'the cinema-effect', as explored in its varied forms and manifestations in the chapters in Rajadhyaksha's book, hoping to show how the limits of the film studies approach shape this mode of exploring cinema's effect. It will be my attempt, then, to propose how the media studies approach could overcome this limitation.

'THE CINEMA-EFFECT' IN THE FILM STUDIES APPROACH

The concept of 'the cinema-effect'—an umbrella term used to refer to a range of narrative-symbolic productions, resulting in a particular mode of spectatorial address—runs through the book as a central thesis. Early into the book, Rajadhyaksha describes the cinema-effect as 'a domain of textually enabled productions that are as much "productions" as any in the cinema, but which apparently bypass the standard paradigm of industrial production wedded to the box office and linked with its economies of narrative efficiency' (ibid.: 36). Defined this broadly, the concept then includes 'symbolic production distinct to the moving image and found on the edges of the narrative organization of cinematic space', using which 'the celluloid screen can, directly and unmediatedly, conduct a transaction with the spectator to provide a "fourth look" to the cinema'. It refers to 'the literal siege of the margin upon diegetic space' (ibid.: 43), as well as to 'a widespread social tendency towards evoking film mainly for purposes of re-presentation, re-definition or even evisceration of the cinema: of reprocessing the cinema in order, eventually, to make it available for numerous and varied uses primarily outside the movie theatre' (ibid.: 99–100). Formally, the cinema-effect pertains to the domains of non-realist special effects as well as the marginal historical content, which realism wants to push to the margins, but often fails, especially in the case of Indian cinema.

The cinema-effect works at many deep levels. At one level, it is the result of 'making covert tangential reference to other texts or histories, or to an elusive idiolect that requires knowing spectators to "get it"'. The effect 'celebrates something of a spectatorial rite of passage'; it also functions 'as a sort of brand recall' (ibid.: 102). At another level is 'the purely symbolic dimension of the cinema-effect, seen in the work of Pakistani artists evoking, via film, a possible

collective memory capable of bypassing and bracketing the political'. At yet another level, the cinema-effect refers to the 'cinephiliac properties in their social ubiquity, in spaces where the cinema proliferates', producing 'an array of mediatized effects all around us' (ibid.: 103). The cinema-effect, for Rajadhyaksha, is also what replaces celluloid in the era of Bollywood, 'feeding our "desire for cinema" into a recycling of the cinema "as we knew it"' (ibid.: 105).

Rajadhyaksha's attempt is to define the key effect of cinema in terms of its intrinsic anti-realist impulses, or in terms of an array of excessive effects that the medium would inherently produce by always escaping realism's disciplining. Evidently drawing political energy from the projects of 'provincializing Europe', what is attempted here is a theory of cinema that provincialises realist cinema, by making Indian cinema and its facets the book's central obsession. In the process, the book subjects to scrutiny the validity of a range of well-established conceptual frameworks in the entrenched traditions of Western film theory (much as in genre studies), illustrating how they often become inadequate in explaining 'why the cinema took root in India the way it did' (ibid.: 6). Yet, one problem that I see as resulting from this approach is the following: Rajadhyaksha defines the cinema-effect a bit too broadly so that it effectively remains in the book largely as a phenomenon that defies definition—as an effect the dimensions of which can only be illustrated by probing every instance of its manifestation and appropriation. Partly, this problem follows from viewing (the minority) film cultures in the West working more or less within well-definable bounds, whereas those in the Indian and Asian contexts, which are taken to be representative of film cultures in most parts of the world (and quite rightly so), are understood to be always posing challenges to any attempt at discrete descriptions.

In addition, although Rajadhyaksha uses the term 'cinema-effect' to describe an array of social–cultural effects, manifesting in practices and cultures of other media/art forms than cinema per se, the concept nevertheless remains too cinema-centric: i.e., the effects remain un-nameable independent of/outside cinema and their practices, especially in regions outside the West and Europe. As a result, we are left with the question: Is the cinema-effect the production of cinema as a medium, echoing also in other related domains of art and culture, or are we talking about certain effects that follow cinema's ability to satisfactorily enable a desirable mode of mediating with the world? If the latter is the case, the desire for producing these effects *comes first*, and cinema fulfils such desires by proposing itself as the medium that is most suited for the task. To approach 'cinema-effect' this way is to ask: What is cinema's place and role in the broader history of the arts and technologies of mediating the world?

Without discounting the usefulness of the discussions on the cinema-effect that Rajadhyaksha has offered in the book, we could turn to the field of media studies for frameworks that might help us with approaching cinema and its effects from a wider historical perspective. In what follows, I shall take up for consideration a useful and definitive proposition that the media philosopher Vilem Flusser makes about what is cinema's social–cultural effect. Flusser's formulation strives towards offering us comprehensive explanations for cinema's position as the central cultural institution over the last century, by placing cinema as a technological medium within the broader history of media forms and technology. I intend to do this by discussing Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* (1964) as a film that deliberates on the medium of cinema itself, and as a film that allows us to understand Flusser's schema.

CINEMA AS AN APPARATUS OF THE TECHNICAL IMAGE

To decode a technical image is not to decode what it shows, but to read how it is programmed.

—Vilem Flusser (1985/2011: 48)

Since Vilem Flusser could be an unfamiliar name in the field of film studies and media studies in India, it is essential that I begin with presenting his theoretical framework very briefly, before getting into the discussion of the film. In his book (1985/2011), Flusser compels us to think of the technical image—i.e., the image made with the technological apparatus of the camera working on our behalf—conceptually as a device of 'mediation' between the alienated human being and the given world/the concrete, which emerged as dominant after the cultural–historical eras dominated by 'the traditional image' and 'the text' as mediations. In the schema that Flusser works with, paradigm shifts from one historical epoch to another happen when

a new mediational device emerges, gradually becomes dominant, and eventually loses its purchase over time after being challenged and replaced by a new device and its regime. The technical image—today's dominant mediational device—emerged by replacing the text, which had emerged by replacing the traditional image. He considers photography, cinema, television as well as the computer as the apparatuses of the technical image, the basic functions of which are to 'compute and calculate'. Flusser is able to see the technical image in general, including its use in photography and cinema, as devices of computation and calculation by making use of the fact that photographs are composed of pixels, which he likens to text disintegrating into particles. Here is Flusser's formulation in his own words:

> Texts are concepts strung together like beads on an abacus, and the threads that order these concepts are rules, orthographic rules. The circumstances described in a text appear by way of these rules and are grasped and manipulated according to them, that is, the structure of the text impresses itself on the circumstances, just as the structure of the [traditional] image did. (…) [W]e have only recently begun to realize that we don't discover these rules in the environment (e.g., in the form of natural laws); rather they come from our own scientific texts. In this way, we lose faith in the laws of syntax. We recognize in them rules of play that could also be other than they are, and with this recognition, the orderly threads finally fall apart and the concepts lose coherence. In fact, the situation disintegrates into a swarm of particles and quanta, and the writing subject into a swarm of bits and bytes, moments of decision, and molecules of action (1985/2011: 9–10).

For Flusser, the distinction between the traditional image and the technical image is crucial, because the image surface produced by a painter is radically different from the one that 'an envisioner' produces using a technical apparatus. The painter translates his perceptions into an actual surface, giving abstract ideas a concrete form, whereas the technical image, for Flusser, is an abstraction retreating from the concrete. This awareness of the fact that image surfaces in the traditional image and the technical image are conceived completely differently, despite the apparent contiguity

between them, should prompt us to look for the meaning of the technical image in a place other than that of the traditional image. Such a view of cinema as the key apparatus of the technical image, or as an envisioning device, allows us to place the medium within a longer history of technological innovations, and of our desires for producing specific media effects in modes that we seek to relate to the world. Moreover, it also offers us a certain basic framework with which to understand the transformations taking place now in contemporary media ecology, which we call the shift to the post-celluloid, digital age, when the technical image has mutated further to take newer forms and functions. I offer a reading of Satyajit Ray's *Charulata* that can be understood as a deliberation on cinema as such, following Flusser's formulations.

CINEMA, AUTOMATION AND THE OPERA GLASS IN RAY'S *CHARULATA*

In his short essay on Ray's 1964 film *Charulata*, based on Tagore's 1901 novel *Nastanirh*, Moinak Biswas identifies a dichotomy present in Tagore's original text, which the film develops into a set of strong motifs (2003). Biswas describes this dichotomy as one between 'the secret, interior within the interior', which the protagonist Charulata nurtures, and 'the real world of politics' that Bhupati, her husband, is almost lost to. The essay also shows us that this dichotomy figures in the film in other oppositional binaries as well: 'the truth of the home' vs. 'the public enterprise of a political magazine'; Charulata's use of writing as 'a private mode of expressive selfhood' vs. Bhupati's orientation towards 'writing for public circulation'; and above all, the dichotomy between 'literature as associated with the woman', and 'politics as belonging to the man'. The general consensus in discussions on *Charulata* also conforms to this as the configuration of the two domains pitted against each other in the film.

Let us consider the last binary, i.e., between 'literature as feminine' and 'politics as masculine'. One wonders: Where would cinema figure on this spectrum? After all, when Satyajit Ray picked this novel that Tagore wrote early in the 20th century, pitting literature against politics, wouldn't he—i.e., Ray—have approached it with cinema in mind? Our discussions of *Charulata* have treated it as Ray's rendition of this Tagorean dichotomy in 'cinematic language'. In contrast, I would argue that in *Charulata*, beyond cinema rendering the dichotomy that pits 'the political' against

something that helps us transcend 'the political', what we get is cinema figured and positioned within this dichotomy. My argument, in other words, is that the film can be seen as Ray's attempt to align cinema somewhere within the opposition that Tagore presents between masculine politics and feminine literature.

There are obvious reasons why much of our discussion on *Charulata* has concentrated on its portrayal of the domestic interior. After all, that is the privileged sphere in the film; at least, it would appear so at first glance. But there is a striking texture to the way the film captures the masculinised domain of political discussions—the domain against which the film undertakes the apparent privileging of the domestic. We see men leaning over texts, obsessed over checking and verifying if their attempts to produce precise formulations about the world have got their alignments correct. We see them constantly trying out equations to map the past and make blueprints for the future by ordering the universe into discrete units and events, and arranging them along the linear thread of history. Politics here is identified as a process of discretisation and decoding through which we derive explanations and interpretations. In this domain, the conversations between men sound as if they are engaged in compressing the world so as to get a proper grasp over it. Charulata's husband Bhupati cannot take his eyes off scrutinising these equations for a second. This domain is shown as masculine, because it brims with an excess of intention in what these people do when they try to explain and interpret the world.

It is against this mode of viewing the world as discretised and rationalised that Ray posits Charulata's world of suturing, of craving for images of the world—outside of our codifications, closer to the way it really exists. Charulata's world encloses her from all around, and she constantly yearns for images of it—at its randomness, and in such a way that her desire will not determine the image. This is in contrast to Bhupati, who is almost always frustrated that, despite his efforts all day at the press, the world cannot be fully codified within the margins of the newspaper sheets before him. Consequently, the contrast is between Bhupati's attempt to get the world assembled in front of his eyes, and Charulata's longing to let it be the way it is—and see it that way—as surrounding her. The famous shot of Charulata looking through her opera glass at Bhupati leaning over onto a newsprint must then be seen as signifying

this desire to transcend politics, and to make the domain of the political just another constituent particle of the universe. Seen in this way, the film acquires its peculiar quality, above all, from pitting discretisation as a mode of grasping the world, against a superior or a more desirable mode of mediation that Charulata's quest for a distinct style of writing signifies. We can now see why Ray must have found this opposition as appropriate to use in his contemplation on cinema. There cannot be another coherent explanation for why, in a film that juxtaposes literature against politics, the opera glass is the most fetishised object.

The idea, however, is not to suggest that the opera glass in *Charulata* is an allegory for cinema in the reductive sense—that both are associated with the act of gazing or that they allow us to conceive the world visually, and so on. Rather, we should resort to Flusser's argument that the apparatuses we use to produce technical images need to be understood through the concept of automation. Flusser defines automation as 'a self-governing computation of accidental events, excluding human intervention and stopping at a situation that human beings have determined to be informative [or meaningful]' (2011: 19). He argues that the camera condemns us to a superficial position, as it takes over the task of producing images of the world according to how we have programmed it, even as this condemning to superficiality is something that liberates us as well. This double nature is what characterises automation: we are superficial to the apparatus, which, however, works according to how we have programmed it to derive meaningful images by bringing the particle elements of the world together. 'The envisioner's superficiality, to which the apparatus has condemned him and for which the apparatus has freed him, unleashes a wholly unanticipated power of invention. Images appear as no one before could ever have dreamed they would,' says Flusser (ibid.: 37). After all, it is not difficult to see that *Charulata* is driven by a desire to take a fresh look at the world, inviting us to look outside the familiar codifications that especially the rationalist–progressive literature of the time had deployed in its representation. In other words, the film looks to re-enchant the world through its search for fresh frames to look at objects, people and landscapes, as well as relations between them, which remained underexplored in available representations.

Thus, we could approach the opera glass in *Charulata* as a metaphor illustrating the function of automation. It must make us think of computation, technical images and cinema, vis-a-vis the political as a mediational frame or device. Making use of the quality of any photographic image as composed of pixels, Flusser argues that technical images constitute a cultural revolution by leading us away from linear one-dimensionality—or the conceptual universe of texts, narratives and explanations—to a new mode of grasping the universe as a swarm of accidental events or particles. In order to describe what this crossing over means, Flusser invokes the evocative image of the text collapsing into particles which must then be gathered up. To Flusser, 'the level of technical images is the level of computation' (ibid.: 7). Exchanging the universe of texts for one of technical images means turning from extreme abstraction back into the imaginable, or the concrete.

That the opera glass is not indeed an automated technological apparatus of image-making in the way the camera is must not distract us from identifying the purpose it serves in the film. First of all, the film's presentation of the protagonist as obsessed with the opera glass—an object that is strikingly absent in the original novel—allows the film to present a subject overwhelmed by an intense desire to relate to the world around her on one's own, i.e., outside of how it has been codified or compressed. In the famous opera glass sequence in the film, we see Charulata standing behind the windowpane, holding her glass and looking at the activity on the street; after briefly pondering over a few random visuals that the street has to offer, she fixates on a man with a potbelly and an amusing walk; instantly enamoured by this figure, she abandons other visuals of the street to pursue the sight of his walk along the street until he goes out of sight; she then withdraws into herself, as if she has attained something from the world to meditate on. The opera glass as the mediating device here activates a performative 'chance encounter' with the world, which is highly desirable for the protagonist as well as the film, because, despite the obvious fact that the sequence is designed and choreographed (i.e., no doubt, the visuals of the street were deliberately staged by the filmmaker), its presentation as a series of randomly occurring visuals obtained through a mediating device that merely re-presents the world for

our solicitous gaze signifies a desire to grasp the world anew. It is this desire (already existing in Tagore) and the possibilities of its full realisation (with the help of the cinematic apparatus) that the film posits against the other mode of relating to the world, which the novel as well as the film quite explicitly spells out as the rationalised one-dimensional historical view of the world, or simply as the frame of the political.

Thus, on the one hand, the film's astute introduction of the opera glass into the scheme of things foregrounds and accentuates the contrasting impulses inherent in the two modes of writing juxtaposed in both the film as well as the novel: the poetic and the political. After all, the opera glass for Charulata is what allows a self-absenting mode of relating to the world in which the world overpowers us even when the mediating device allows us to narrow in on what we want to solicit from the world—in contrast to her husband's rationalised view which looks to compress the world according to the scientific knowledge about it. What slips through her husband's fingers, as he attempts to represent the world within the frames of rationalisation, is that which Charulata's mediating devices help her to pick and probe. But the opera glass also functions as the stand-in for cinema as the apparatus that can realise the poetic–expressive mode of grasping the world as freed from the political domain. It illustrates the function of the camera as the automated machine capable of deriving meaningful information again from the world—by generating technical images out of the released particles which are now in free play. Recalling Flusser's argument that the technical image retreats from the concrete towards abstraction, we could see Charulata as desiring a mediating device that would free the world from its solidified representations, yet capable of deriving meaningful images of it for us, independent of us and our desires. Camera and cinematography seem to respond to this desire well. Thus, the opera glass is our clue to assert that Ray approached the novel indeed with cinema in his mind, cinema here signifying not the latest 'visual medium', but the tool of a new epistemic project offering possibilities of making sense of the world anew, after the hegemony of the political and of the one-dimensional text/history.

If I have succeeded in arguing the above proposition forcefully, it is now time to ask: Why is this mode of relating to

the world through technical images figured as overwhelmingly feminine? As a way of answering, I suggest that we must probe this gendered figuration by treating it as figurative as such, disassociating it from its empirical referent, i.e., by not hastily assuming a correspondence between 'the feminine' and 'women' as its referent. It begins to make sense if, instead, we understand the gendering as signifying a desirable position of powerlessness against the world, acknowledging/asserting its superlative status which is both a rejection of its codifications in the political mode, as well as a soliciting gestured towards it so that it may give forth in new ways. This mode, then, figures as feminine, signifying the masochist relation to the world that cinema engenders—a relation in which one absents oneself by delegating to the apparatus the task of bringing the world closer to us, which is contrasted with the sadistic relation to the world in the political mode of rationalisation, marked by an excess of (masculine) intention to do something to the world.

This embrace of the feminine–poetic mode as a mediational frame can be historicised. Historically, this mode seems to have emerged under/after conditions of intense politicisation, as a compensatory mechanism to recuperate from what is typically considered as 'modernity's assault' on us, our worlds and nature. It can thus be understood as the attempt to regain the resources of expression, in a therapeutic exercise against the aftermath of the impulses of compression in the political mode—if we define 'the political' normatively, as predisposed towards compressing the world at the expense of too much attention to details, so that chosen aspects of life are privileged over others for elaboration and intervention. In Bengal, Tagore seems to have already begun probing this mode in his writings during the peak period of the nationalist movement, although during his lifetime the political domain always asserted its dominance over poetics, the former subordinating the latter to its requirements. If Satyajit Ray, with cinema on his side, is returning to Tagore after Independence, i.e., after the realisation of the ends of the long, intense nationalist movement, it marked the resurgence of Tagorean poetics beginning to assert its dominance over the political.[1] And it is not accidental that cinema, as the most evolved apparatus of technical image, is centrally in the equation. Using Flusser's description of the transition from the epoch of the linear text to the regime of the technical image, we could say, as our

trust in 'the political' begins to diminish with the realisation that the rules and formulas according to which we have rearranged our world in the hope of achieving certain desired results have eventually started failing us (manifesting mainly as disillusionment with the nation), the need arises for a new mediating device that will facilitate a re-engagement with the world. The automated apparatus of the technical image, programmed to derive meaningful information/ images from a world freed from the grasp of the political, proposes a solution as a result of which cinema appears as the natural choice for the new task.

ON CINEMA AND THE COMPUTER

The usefulness of the media studies approach is that it can equip us better to map the media–ecological transformations that seem to be taking place today across the world, by considering cinema and its transactions with the 20th-century state as part of a longer history of technology and media effects. The desire to relate to the world through the mediation of the automated apparatus of the technical image, as thematised in *Charulata* according to my argument, is a masochist one which shaped the aesthetics, politics and cultural life until recently, but something that is now being replaced by the mediational effects that the computer has put in place. I shall conclude by quoting from Alexander Galloway, another media philosopher who has attempted a definitive formulation about this transformation from the era of cinema to a regime of today's informatic media:

> [T]o be 'cinematically' present to the world, to experience the pleasure of the movies, one must be a masochist. That is to say, to be in a relation of presence with the world cinematically, one must subject the self to the ultimate in pain and humiliation, which is nothing short of complete erasure. […]. The computer breaks with those arts (painting, photography, cinema) that fixate upon the embodied human form—the face, but not always, the hand, but not always—and its proximal relation to a world, if not as their immediate subject matter then at least as the absolute horizon of their various aesthetic investments. The computer has not this same obsession. It aims not for man as an object. […]. If the movie screen always directs toward, the computer screen always directs away.

If at the movies you tilt your head back, with a computer you tilt in. […] To be informatically present to the world, to experience the pleasure of the computer, one must be a sadist (2012: 11–13).

To understand the sadistic relation to the world that the computer engenders, we must bear in mind that it is a machine that, rather than presenting us with one world that exists out there in its autonomy, creates or programmes worlds for us by calculating the inputs and formulas that we feed it. The relation is sadistic because the computer images the world in ways we want it, by inviting us to see the universe as composed of mere data and information that can be counted, manipulated, and moulded into the shapes and formations we want to make of them.

Of course, such formulations work with a general/abstract theory of cinema/media which cannot often pay heed to the diversity of the phenomenological field, which a work like Rajadhyaksha's is able to attend to, and compel the field of theory to reciprocate. Yet, any attempt to make sense of contemporary times calls for approaches that allow us to grasp the transitions in the field of media and culture by taking a step back from the field and its richness so that the larger paradigm shifts become visible.

◆

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

NOTE

1. See also Chakrabarty (1999) on a discussion of Tagore's unique conception of the domain of the political and how it came in contest with the dominant mode of imagining the political and politicisation during the period of the nationalist struggle in India.

REFERENCES

Biswas, Moinak. 2003. 'Writing on the Screen: Satyajit Ray's Adaptation of Tagore', *Forum Media*, 5 (9). https://www.ipv.pt/forumedia/5/9.htm.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. 1999. 'Nation and Imagination: The Training of the Eye in Bengali Modernity', *Topoi*, 18: 29–47.

Flusser, Vilem. 1985/2011. *Into the Universe of Technical Images*. Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press.

Galloway, Alexander, R. 2012. *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 2009. *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency*. Delhi: Tulika Books.

◆◆

FILMIC AFTERLIVES
Considerations on the Uncanny*

ASHISH RAJADHYAKSHA

RASHMI SAWHNEY

## THE UNCANNY AFTERLIFE OF THE FILM IMAGE

In her well-known *Death 24x A Second* (2006), Laura Mulvey invites us to revisit a moment when the cinema both disappeared and reappeared as though a visitation of history. What *disappeared* was the 'magic' generated by the chemical reaction between light and photosensitive material, and what *reappeared* was something else: a mode of recording 'information' into a numerical system that seems to simulate 'something'—that once used to be the cinema. There is a break in the process, and now Mulvey suggests, converting a crisis into an opportunity, that that break should enable a return to the cinema's own past and thus to those 'truncated…aspects of modernist thought, politics and aesthetics that seemed to end prematurely before their use or relevance could be internalized or exhausted' (ibid.: 8).

As this revisitation happens, a Pandora's box is opened up. The cinema turns out to have been something quite different from what we thought it was. The essential *banality* of the film image becomes a 'source of uncanniness': 'inanimate images of the filmstrip' that 'not only come alive in projection, but [become] ghostly images of the now-dead resurrected into the appearance of life' (ibid.: 36).

In keeping with his theoretical position, says Mulvey, 'Freud discusses one aspect of the uncanny that is truly archaic' (ibid.: 11)—the very aspect as it happens that would now become relevant for the cinema. It is the uncanniness emerging from 'primitive

beliefs' that we thought we had surmounted, but which 'seem once more to be confirmed…in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead and to spirits and ghosts' (ibid.: 39). Describing with some irony the 'persistent belief, on the part of civilized people and their religions, in the afterlife and, ultimately, the resurrection of the body' (ibid.: 40), Freud saw in this persistence the 'residues of archaic fears and superstitions (in) the belief that the spirits of the dead are able to visit the living' in a natural world 'itself inhabited and animated by the presence of spirits' (ibid.: 40).

THE FABRICATED LEGEND OF ANARKALI
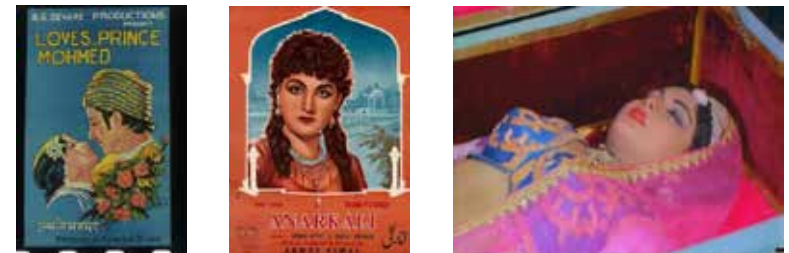
Left: N. G. Devare's *Ulfat-e-Mohammed* (silent; 1929); *Centre:* Nurjehan's version of *Anarkali* (Anwar Kemal; 1958); *Right:* Deepa as Anarkali in N. T. Rama Rao's Telugu version, *Akbar Saleem Anarkali* (1978). Images courtesy of authors

A possible exploration of Indian cinema's own relationship with the uncanny, the ghostly and the archivable may well begin with one of its most famous iconographies: the Mughal 'slave girl' Anarkali, and her celebrated love story with Prince Salim. The archive has to begin with the first question: Did she ever exist, or was she a fabrication? Art historian Ebba Koch reads into the famous lines, engraved on the side of the sarcophagus-shaped tombstone or cenotaph of the Anarkali mausoleum in Lahore, a condition of mad love akin, she says, to *majnūn Salīm-i Akbar* ('The madly-in-love Salim, [son of] Akbar'), or Jahangir's self-identification with the mad love of Majnun.[1] On the legend itself, Koch throws no further light: Anarkali, writes Koch, was 'according to a popular tale' a 'slave girl in Akbar's harem with whom Jahangir, when still Prince Salim, fell in love. Akbar was enraged and is said to have had her buried alive' (Koch, 2010: 303).

So might the legend itself, and who knows even the artefacts that produced it, not all be products of the *deewanapan* (madness)? While the legend itself may have originated in a 19th-century novel

by Abdul Halim Sharar, its current incarnation is traceable to a 1922 romantic play by the Lahore-based playwright Imtiaz Ali Taj that would have a profound cinematic afterlife. Two years after it was staged, the Great Eastern Film Corporation, started by Himanshu Rai with partial funding from a retired Lahore High Court judge named Moti Sagar, announced a mega-budget adaptation, *The Loves of a Mughal Prince*. Taj, the playwright, was himself slated to play Emperor Akbar. Slow to complete, this ponderous production was, inevitably, upstaged by a lower-budgeted quickie simply named *Anarkali* by the Bombay-based Imperial Studio, featuring in-house star Sulochana. Great Eastern, beaten to this particular goalpost, however remained unfazed. Several of its members would work on Rai's next and more successful feature, the spectacular *Shiraz* (1928), which stamped the big-budget Mughal romance with its stature. By the time of Independence, there were at least three major Anarkali films: the two silents mentioned, and a sound remake of the Imperial film, also with Sulochana, in 1935. After Independence, a famous production with Bina Rai in 1953 was followed by Nurjehan's 1958 version. There were two in Telugu—the first in 1955 by Anjali Pictures, and the second, megastar N.T. Rama Rao's florid *Akbar Saleem Anarkali* (1978)—and one in Malayalam (1966). The most famous of all was of course K. Asif's gargantuan epic *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960).

Could it be, then, that the Anarkali legend is not just an invention, but an *invention of the cinema*—an early example of a ghostly fabrication written into history? Let's suppose it is so and ask: What, then, follows? There is one immediate consequence, in that the historiographic question we face is no longer limited to the conventional search for corroborative evidence of whether the original Anarkali lived or not. Perhaps she did, perhaps not. The question, entering an era of copies without originals, becomes increasingly distanced from a far more pressing archival challenge: to track, together with the celluloid reels that captured the deewanapan with the magic of the photochemical process, the larger career of the mesmerising *effect*, in speech and song, text and film.

The legend itself, together with a range of costume films vaguely referencing Mughal grandeur, is commonly viewed as having inspired what has come to be called the 'Islamicate' film:[2] a genre of historical phantasy that outlines, in the words of Ravi Vasudevan, 'a "traditional" Muslim order, defined by the features of aristocratic

habitation' (Vasudevan, 2015: 35–36). Kaushik Bhaumik casts a wider net. To him, the genre also adapts, refines and restages a far more elaborate canvas, the 'stunt films that until now had focused mainly on Gujarati Rajput princely styles' (2001: 147–48).

While they may be right on the content, the error both historians may well be making is to view such a production as a 'genre', and thus a static mode of classification, when what is perhaps needed is its re-infusion into it the dynamic production of an affect. If we do this right, we may be able to track a specific history, with a backstory and an afterlife, *that may turn out to be nothing less than the history of the cinema itself, now viewed as a particular kind of affective production machine.*

If we did all this, the legend's fidelity to history would be revealed as a fidelity to a fuzzy interiorised logic of some kind: its 'text', however we define it, far transcending its plot. Such survival turns out to be manifold. As cultural memory, it links to several strands that return in film after film, often in the placement and framing of characters: notably the dense close-ups, the flaring light-effects, of casting, of cinematography and sound, and perhaps above all of set design. On this level, it is as though the *making of a film is itself the anthropology of cinema* as films quote each other, fold inside each other, or hover over each other. Every film, thus seen, becomes a history of the cinema.

Remakes are crucial here. As quintessential cultural survivals, they include but go significantly beyond technical survival. Joining other forms of haunting cultural survivals, remakes take on the responsibility of retaining multiple cinematic lineages. Filmistan's 1953 Bina Rai rendition of *Anarkali* has the pivotal role of Jodhabai played by Sulochana, the star from the original 1928 Imperial version, for no obvious reason other than the assertion of such a lineage, a declaration of narrative fidelity that is independent of storytelling. *Mughal-e-Azam*'s own last-minute trick solution in which Akbar (Prithviraj Kapoor) sets Anarkali free by giving her a secret escape route or, yet more spectacularly, when NTR's Akbar allows court singer Tansen to persuade him to give his blessings for Salim and Anarkali to live happily ever after, do no damage either to these films' Islamicate credentials or to their essentially tragic assumption of Anarkali's death. While remakes, like remastered versions, may include a commodified upscaling (*Mughal-e-Azam*'s own all-colour re-release in 2010), they equally descend into lowbrow popular memory. The character of Malaika Arora and her 'item' number *Anarkali Disco Chali* in Sajid

Khan's *Housefull-II* (2012) would also produce the political content and referencing of sexual violence and corrupt state-sponsored masculinities in movie star (and visible icon of several progressive causes) Swara Bhaskar's *Anaarkali of Aarah* (2017).

If Hollywood developed in the first two decades of the 20th century a language of performance, camera work, editing and even celluloid-processing, founded upon what Janet Staiger identified as a 'Hollywood Mode of Production' (1985: 91) premised on interchangeability, standardisation and assembly, what much of the early Indian cinema may have done was equally astonishing: a *counter-mode*—we may call it—that opened a way of making, showing and seeing films, and indeed something resembling an industrial practice—or at least a functioning substitute for it—that produced a market, ranging through the subcontinent, mainly through retaining and perpetuating cultural memory, clinging on to the fading image and refusing to die even as it cannot live.

MAUT WAHI JO DUNIYA DEKHE (DEATH IS ONLY DEATH WHEN WITNESSED BY ALL)

The walling in of Anarkali. Madhubala in *Mughal-e-Azam* (1960). Image courtesy of authors

Biting the bait, to revisit via Mulvey (and Freud) the cinema's pasts through its affective afterlives, we enter the narrative at Sheesh Mahal. The set, two years in the making and ₹1.5 million later, in its own splintered invocation of an afterlife, perhaps shines a light on our queries about the boundary between life and death. In the song *pyar kiya toh darna kya* (why fear if you're in love), which hypnotised

our popular imagination—as a declaration of intent even more epic than *Mughal-e-Azam* the film itself—one might argue that the uncanny makes an appearance *as* Anarkali.

The magnificent large-scale replica (150 × 82 × 35 foot) of the Sheesh Mahal from the Lahore Fort used thousands of mirrors to create an image that had never before (or since) been seen in Indian cinema.[3] Madhubala as Anarkali declares, *maut wahi joh duniya dekhe* (death is only death when witnessed by all), as the camera tilts to a hundred mirror images of Anarkali reflected from the ceiling: a direct invitation to a public spectacle, holding the possible return to what Mulvey calls our 'truncated histories' that play out as the afterlife of an affect whose history must be traced back to the cinema.

If alienation from the screen/mirror image, followed by the fantasy of becoming one with it, has been foundational to our understanding of film spectatorship, one could also ask if the hundred swirling Anarkalis of *Mughal-e-Azam* were the uncanny premonition of a *Muslim female public* that was otherwise absent from Indian cinema. It is at the moment of witnessing the spectacle of these splintered reflections that fear strikes the Emperor.

DELHI, DECEMBER 2019

Left & Right: Protesters at Shaheen Bagh. Images courtesy of PTI

An unprecedented event is being played out in India: its female population is constructing a discourse around the 'commons' through a language and visual idiom that marks a rupture in the biography of the nation. Demonstrations against the Citizenship Amendment Act (then still a Bill) by students of Jamia Millia Islamia University in Delhi, the spread in a flash of anti-CAA and NRC (National Register of Citizens) protests across the country, and simultaneous attempts by the state to supress these through police

brutality, led to a burgeoning swell of affect that was seen by many as the long-due becoming of a 'Republic'.

Mulvey often draws upon Freud's notion of 'deferred action' in understanding cinematic temporality. Deferred action, according to Freud, takes place when the unconscious preserves a specific experience, while its traumatic effect might only be realised by another, later but associated, event. Anarkali's live burial, a horrific and dread-invoking act, may perhaps be a premonition of the suffocation of Islamic expression in contemporary India.

Left: Ayesha Renna warding off the Delhi police (Credit: Ali Khan Mahmudabad; Twitter);
Right: Ladeeda Sakhloon, Chanda Yadav and Ayesha Renna at the Jamia protest
(Credit: Shakeeb; https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/delhi/2020/jan/09/
caa-protest-enters-27th-day-at-jamia-shaheen-bagh--2087091.html.)

Ladeeda Sakhloon, Chanda Yadav and Ayesha Renna stand on a raised wall, fingers pointing skywards, demanding their Constitutional rights. The visuality is striking. The constellation that was forming in early 2020 was made up of women's bodies, and particularly Muslim women's bodies. As much as it gestured towards the possibility of the embodiment of the Indian Republic, it was also the embodiment of Anarkali's splintered reflections in the Sheesh Mahal haunting the public sphere. 'It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present casts its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation', writes Walter Benjamin (1999: 462; N2a: 3). That image was the photograph of the Jamia girls protecting their fellow male students, pointing a warning finger at the attacking police force during the anti-CAA protests.

'I HAVE MAGIC IN ME, SHE SAID': 'SHE HAS HANDS'
Sometime in the early 2000s, the artist Naiza Khan decided to take her *Henna Hands* series into the street. She had originally explored

mehndi (henna), built up directly on the wall, combined as it was with some astonishing charcoal drawings. The overt reference was to the woman's body: stained, marked, at once sensuous, erotic and vulnerable. Such a bodily presence was now given a kind of inaudible speech: phrases—Khan says these were all taken from things actually said to her—covered with latex that, as it became more and more solid and opaque, also becomes a text dimmed and muffled. 'The skin or *Jaal* offers connotations of a control that silences', writes Khan (2008). 'At one level this work merged the idea of seduction and simultaneously turned it into a symbol of subjugation, a sort of "sold" stamp…on the bride's hand' (ibid.).

Above: Naiza Khan, stencilled henna paste on wall, in *Voices Merge*, Chawkandi Art Gallery, Karachi, 2000

Below: Naiza Khan, *Henna Hands*, stencilled henna paste on wall. Installation, Cantt. Station, Karachi, 2002. Both images courtesy of authors

When Khan took this work—private, confessional, exploratory, made within the confines of the studio and shown in the intimacy of the art gallery—into the street, she did something inconceivable. And yet there it was: her mehndi appeared on walls of railway stations and other such places full of garbage, 'advertisements for cigarettes, body lotions, and computer training courses, … overlaid with calligraphed announcements of rallies by ethnic, political, and Islamic groups, cigarette butts, bodily waste, and decaying printed matter', writes Iftikhar Dadi (2010: 202–3).

In many ways, like the words that were gradually obscured by the hardening latex, the images on the walls too dimmed and faded over time. And so it was that Khan, in an early exhibition at Karachi's Chawkandi Gallery, displaying her charcoal drawings and her muffled text, alongside and opposite the mehndi on walls, faced up to the question of what to do with the fading, and destruction, of the works that were directly on the walls. Among the possibilities: building another wall in front of it. To Khan, who remembers *Mughal-e-Azam* on television as a child, the reference to Anarkali was immediate, and absolute. The muffling of the voice, the forgetting associated with time and its conquering of time as the legend refused to be silenced: its death and rebirth through walling in and reappearing on public walls produces a chain of recurring signification, silence and re-signification.

ENCOUNTERING THE GHOST

Entering the Anarkali mausoleum in Lahore is, for a hundred reasons, not easy. It is walled over a hundred times, and many of the walls are invisible ones as the legend, infinitely more than the brick and stone, holds the place together. What apparatus of state can possible shore up a saga such as this, you wonder, as your memory gets inextricably linked to the bricks being laid by the wall that will bury her alive. Your wall now, inevitably, is that of the state itself, for the real-life tomb turns out to be within the high-security zone of the Punjab Civil Secretariat. Permissions are eventually found, but the wait outside a heavily guarded gate is necessary: body still, fantasies in full flight.

Sometime in the early 19th century, the grave was uprooted and moved into a corner (Glover, 2008: 19). The Anarkali mosque was converted into offices and residences for the clerical staff of

Above: Anarkali's grave, now in one corner of the Mosque/Church/Archive; *Middle:* The Bhagat Singh exhibits: a bill for an order of Italian hats; *Below:* Records of the 1857 mutiny inside the Anarkali mosque. Images courtesy of authors

Punjab's governing board. In 1851, it was further converted into an Anglican church, and in 1891 it became a document repository for the Civil Secretariat.

Everything changed—and, inevitably, nothing did, as the hauntings of past history folded into new avatars. Dadi speaks of a 'shadowy, spectral visual aesthetic', which he finds in silhouettes on the street, but the ghostly visual aesthetics also clearly suffuse a place like this (2009: 160). The tomb is as dense a site of visual modernity as the street. What perhaps connects the two, if Naiza Khan's work—or indeed Ladeeda, Chanda and Ayesha's gesture atop a raised wall—is relevant, is a space between the private and public, one where 'her body'—and we may now speak directly of Anarkali here—becomes a 'site for inscription…a site in which it gained new meaning to hold notions of the symbolic and the physical' (ibid.).

ERASURES AND AFTERLIVES

Anything, in your fevered mind, is possible: and so when you enter with Mughal romance in mind and find *Shaheed Bhagat Singh* instead, you are strangely unsurprised. How could it be otherwise? You dimly recall that Bhagat Singh was hanged in Lahore in March 1931—right next door, it turns out. The Anarkali Police Station rises as the central repository to his key papers, and these are now on display—including the death warrant, alongside a bill for four parcels of felt hats from Messrs Giuseppe Cambiaghi.

It is all blindingly obvious, especially when you next discover key documents of the 1857 Mutiny stored in unsupervised cupboards—*inviting* you, the film spectator—to pick them up and leaf through them. You only wonder which song would be most appropriate. A gentleman in full formal dress escorts some VIP-types through the mosque/church/archive, and begins with the line *aapne Mughal-e-Azam film to dekhi hi hogi* (you must have seen the film *Mughal-e-Azam*?).

You stand at the steps of Alhamra Arts and describe your hallucinatory journey to the artist Farida Batool. She says that there is some literature to suggest that Anarkali may have been Salim's half-sister. Ayesha Jatoi mentions yet other literature in which Anarkali may have been a young Hindu boy.

What might such cultural remnants be that inform the affective surcharge of these constellations? To a large extent they drew upon

figures foundational to our imagination of a secular and democratic India: B. R. Ambedkar, Jyotiba Phule, M. K. Gandhi, Savitribai Phule, Fatima Begum Sheikh, Rabindranath Tagore, Periyar, Bhagat Singh, among others. The seeming erasure from public memory of the struggle for freedom—witnessed among other things through the tokenistic newspaper issues published each 15 August, 26 January or 2 October—made a full-bodied appearance at Shaheen Bagh and the hundreds of other protests across the country between December 2019 and March 2020.

In his essay, Santhosh S. writes:

Walking into the protest site at Shaheen Bagh, you encounter people rehearsing the art of sloganeering.... Unlike the juridical imagination of the constitution as the basis (or the stasis) of the republic, it acquires here the performative potential of the infrastructural object. The constitution becomes an affective object and its existence is an outcome of relations among people who are not only constituted by it, but are also the primary constitutive agents of it. While the mere reliance on (human) rights-discourses reduces politics into a domain of juridical debates, this new infrastructural politics brings it back into the domain of popular contestations (2020).

The domain of popular contestations is an affective domain, mobilising cultural memory through familiar idioms, which, in

Left: Poster credit: Sambhit Patra on Twitter; *Right:* Anti CAA protest pic: Rajeev Bhatt, *The Hindu* (https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/kolkatas-anti-caa-protesters-turn-extra-cautious-after-delhi-violence/article30923435.ece.)

this instance, was the idiom of the 'challenge,' much like that of Anarkali's. It is remarkable that in a country fraught with linguistic divides, the two phrases that resounded across pretty much every linguistic state were *aazadi* (freedom) and *hum dekehnge* (we shall see). Much has been written and spoken about aazadi since 2015, and readers of this issue will need no introduction to those debates.

The mobilisation of *Hum Dekhenge* in the anti-CAA protests: Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poem, written in 1979 as a critique of Zia-ul-Haq's dictatorship, acquired an afterlife through Iqbal Bano's rendition on 13 March 1986 in Lahore, in commemoration of Faiz two years after his death. While several audience members who attended the concert were questioned and detained by the Pakistani army, a surreptitious recording made by a technician at the Alhamra Arts Council, where the performance was held, survived. According to an account provided by Faiz's grandson Ali Madeeh Hashmi, an uncle of his managed to get hold of a copy which he smuggled to Dubai via friends, where multiple copies were further made and distributed widely (Singh, 2009). Faiz's poem entered the force-field of anti-CAA protests via Iqbal Bano, perhaps on account of a Google Doodle on 28 December 2019 to mark Bano's 81st birthday. The remediation of the poem, through a surreptitious recording, brought back into the public domain through YouTube, leveraging cultural memory in its re-performance at a different site, indicates the anthropological folding over of archives of surplus and affect, which happily reside outside institutional frameworks.[4]

When K. Asif had originally set out to make *Mughal-e-Azam* in 1945–1946, Nargis had been cast in Anarkali's role. The film was to be produced by Shiraz Ali Hakim of Cine Studio, who had produced Asif's debut film *Phool* (1945) and had recently acquired partnership in Bombay Talkies (by buying out Devika Rani's shares after her marriage to Svetoslav Roerich). Chandramohan was to play Akbar and Durga Khote, Jodha. Dilip Kumar (Mohammed Yusuf Khan), a relatively unknown actor then on the payroll of Bombay Talkies, had been rejected in favour of D. K. Sapru for the role of Salim. Reports from the 1946 issues of *Film India* suggest production was going on smoothly when communal violence erupted, followed by the bloodbath of Partition. Hakim migrated to Pakistan. *Mughal-e-Azam* was shelved. When K. Asif picked up

the project again, Nargis refused to play the role of Anarkali. She had by then already established herself as the iconic *Mother India* (Mehboob Khan; 1957), renounced her romance with Raj Kapoor, and married Sunil Dutt.

Madhubala, whose real name was Mumtaz Jahan Begum Dehlavi, died in 1969 at the tragically young age of 36. Her real-life romance with Dilip Kumar remained unfulfilled. In these last few decades of growing Hindu fundamentalism and intolerance, Dilip Kumar has often been put in the eye of the storm by the Shiv Sena as representative of the Muslim 'other' in Mumbai—the ironic tragedy of the real-life mortification of Prince Salim. Despite Madhubala's death, Anarkali continues to live on in our cultural memories, including popularly through the large number of memes that have surfaced on the Internet. These memes, fundamentally premised on the assumption of Anarkali's resurrection, state: *utho Anarkali* (rise/wake up, Anarkali), followed by an utterance signalling the banality of life, such as webinar *khatam hua* (the webinar is over) or *deewar ke peeche* isolation *karna hai* (we need to do our pandemic isolation behind the wall), among others. The cultural memory of the challenge issued by Anarkali to Mughal-e-Azam, the Emperor, or the state, persists, therefore, on the basis of an invincible immortality as well as the ability for an utterance of love: *pyar kiya toh darna kya*.

Anarkali memes circulating on social media platforms. The one on the left in particular, is a response to allegations by BJP members that Muslim women were being paid by opposition parties to congregate and maintain a 24-hour vigil at Shaheen Bagh.
Images courtesy of authors

FRAILTIES

In the cinema, says Mulvey,

> Organic movement is transformed into its inorganic replica, a series of static, inanimate, images, which, once projected, then become animated to blur the distinctions between the oppositions…. The homologies extend: on the one hand, the inanimate, inorganic, still, dead; on the other, organic, animate, moving, alive. It is here, with the blurring of these boundaries, that the uncanny nature of the cinematic image returns most forcefully and, with it, the conceptual space of uncertainty: that is, the difficulty of understanding time and the presence of death in life. We can certainly say, with Freud, that we have 'surmounted' belief in the return of the dead, of animate forces in nature and even belief in the afterlife. However, the presence of the past in the cinema is also the presence of the body resurrected and these images can trigger, if only by association, questions that still seem imponderable: the nature of time, the fragility of human life and the boundary between life and death (2006: 52–53).

◆

NOTES

1. *Tā qiyāmat shukr gūyam kirdagār-i khvīsh rā!/Ah gar man bāz bīnam rū-yi yār-i khvīsh rā* (I would give thanks to my God until the day of resurrection/Ah! Should I ever behold the face of my beloved again). Cited in Koch (2010: 277–311). I am grateful to Kavita Singh for drawing my attention to this text.

2. Bhaskar and Allen (2009: 3) use the term 'Islamicate' to refer to the 'social and cultural forms identified with Muslim culture', focusing largely on Muslim historicals (including *Mughal-e-Azam*), courtesan films, Muslim socials and the 'Muslim New Wave'. The most recent film discussed in the book is Khalid Mohammed's *Fiza* (2000), which addresses terrorism in the wake of the 1993 Bombay riots. In a sense, the 1990s mark a break with this older idea of the Islamicate, with a number of contemporary films such as *My Name is Khan* (dir: Karan Johar; 2010), *Raees* (dir: Rahul Dholakia; 2017), *Aamir* (dir: Raj Kumar Gupta; 2008), *New York* (dir: Kabir Khan; 2009), *Black Friday* (dir: Anurag Kashyap; 2007), *Fanaa* (dir: Kunal Kohli; 2006), *Dev* (dir: Govind Nihalani; 2004), among others, establishing a more direct dialogue with global discourses on terrorism and Islamophobia.

3. The art director for *Mughal-e-Azam*, M. K. Syed, also designed the sets for K. Asif's final film *Love and God* (*Kais Aur Laila*; 1986), which, over 23 years of a turbulent production history, remained incomplete in K. Asif's own lifetime, and was released posthumously 12 years after his death by his widow Akhtar Asif (also, incidentally, Dilip Kumar's sister). Shooting for the film had begun in 1963 with Guru Dutt playing the role of Majnu. A year later, Guru Dutt committed suicide on 10 October 1964, at the tragically young age of 39, by overdosing on a mix of alcohol and sleeping pills, and the film was shelved. Sanjeev Kumar was then cast in the role of Majnu and shooting resumed in 1970. However, a year later, K. Asif too passed away in an untimely manner, aged 48. Fifteen years later, his first wife Akhtar Asif decided to release the incomplete film. With the help of film producer K. C. Bokadia, she managed to salvage and piece together usable portions of the incomplete film from three different studios. This cut-paste version was released on 27 May 1986. By the time of the film's release, several of the film's cast members had died, including its leading actor Sanjeev Kumar, who died in 1985. Interestingly, K. Asif's third and younger wife Nigar Sultana plays the role of Bahar Begum in *Mughal-e-Azam*.

4. Much work has now been done to establish the legitimacy of extra-institutional and pirate archives, especially in relation to film and media. See for example, de Kosnik (2016).

REFERENCES

Benjamin, Walter. 1999. *The Arcades Project*. Tr. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Bhaskar, Ira and Richard Allen. 2009. *Islamicate Cultures of Bombay Cinema*. New Delhi: Tulika Books.

Bhaumik, Kaushik. 2001. 'The Emergence of the Bombay Film Industry, 1896–1936.' D.Phil. Thesis. University of Oxford.

Dadi, Iftikhar. 2010. *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

———. 2009. 'Ghostly Sufis and Ornamental Shadows: Spectral Visualities in Karachi's Public Sphere', in Martina Rieker and Kamran Ali (eds.), *Comparing Cities: The Middle East and South Asia*. Karachi: Oxford University Press.

de Kosnik, Abigail. 2016. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Cambridge, MA: MIT.

Glover, William J. 2008. *Making Lahore Modern: Constructing and Imagining a Colonial City*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Khan, Naiza. 2008. 'The Skin She Wears', catalogue of exhibition at Rossi & Rossi Ltd., London, September–October. http://rossirossi.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Naiza-Khan-The-Skin-She-Wears.pdf.

Koch, Ebba. 2010. 'The Mughal Emperor as Solomon, Majnun, and Orpheus, Or the Album as a Think Tank for Allegory', *Muqarnas*, 27:277–311. www.jstor.org/stable/25769700.

Mulvey, Laura. 2006. *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image*. London: Reaktion Books.

Rajadhyaksha, Ashish. 2021 (forthcoming). 'The Lahore Effect', in Iftikhar Dadi and Ayesha Jatoi (eds.), *The Lahore Biennale Reader LB01*.

Santhosh, S. 2020. 'A Spectre of Velivada Haunts Indian Politics: Thinking with Shaheen Bagh', *Raiot,* 14 February. https://www.raiot.in/a-spectre-of-velivada-haunts-indian-politics-thinking-with-shaheen-bagh/. Accessed on 21 September 2020.

Singh, Sushant. 2009. 'The Story of Faiz's *Hum Dekhenge*—From Pakistan to India over 40 Years', *The Indian Express*, 20 December. https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/the-story-of-faizs-hum-dekhenge-from-pakistan-to-india-over-40-years-caa-protest-6186565/. Accessed on 21 September 2020.

Staiger, Janet. 1985. 'The Hollywood Mode of Production to 1930', in David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson and Janet Staiger, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Vasudevan, Ravi. 2015. 'Film Genres, the Muslim Social, and Discourses of Identity c. 1935–1945', *Bio Scope,* 6 (1): 27–43.

◆◆

CONTRIBUTORS

TRINANKUR BANERJEE is a graduate student in the Department of Film and Media Studies, University of California, Santa Barbara. His research interests include the encounters between global forms of comedy and vernacular cultures, genre and intermediality, and comparative media industry studies. He has published in *Indian Film Culture* and *Short Film Studies*, among others. Banerjee is the co-editor of the upcoming *Media Fields* issue, titled 'Media Mutualities'.

IPSITA BARAT is Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication and Videography, as well as Acting Head, Film Studies Department, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Kolkata. She has completed her doctoral research at the Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and postgraduate degree from AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, Delhi. Barat's academic research remains focused on Bollywood, industrial networks and investments in the post-millennium Hindi film industry, including film marketing.

SUDIPTO BASU is a PhD candidate and UGC-SRF Scholar in Cinema Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi. He currently works on the intersections of computational media, extractivism, logistics and post-cinema/experimental film. A video essay he co-directed on unfulfilled urban utopias, *Tracts of Dust*, showed at the Bangkok Biennale 2018 and 5th Little Cinema Int'l Festival Kolkata, among others. His research has been presented in various national and international venues, including Critical Zone (Hamburg 2019) and Transmediale (Berlin 2020).

SPANDAN BHATTACHARYA is Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, BITS, Pilani (Hyderabad campus).

He has contributed essays to books and journals by Taylor and Francis, *Acta Orientalia Vilnensia*, among others. His co-authored book on Bengali cinema, *From Tollygunge to Tollywood: The Bengali Film Industry Reimagined*, is forthcoming from Orient BlackSwan; and his co-edited volume, *Film Studies: An Introduction* will soon be published by Worldview.

UMA MAHESWARI BHRUGUBANDA teaches in the Department of Cultural Studies, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. She is the author of *Deities and Devotees: Cinema, Religion and Politics in South India*, which examines mythological and devotional cinema. She has also co-edited *Vegetarians Only: Stories of Telugu Muslims,* and is co-author of *Towards a World of Equals: A Bilingual Textbook on Gender*. Bhrugubanda is currently working on two projects—one on contemporary Telugu cinema, and the other on women in early cinema.

MOINAK BISWAS is Professor, Film Studies, Jadavpur University, where he is also the Coordinator of the Media Lab, a centre for experiments in digital forms. He writes on Indian cinema and culture. He edits the *Journal of the Moving Image*. Biswas has written and co-directed the award-winning Bengali feature film *Sthaniya Sambaad* (2010), and has more recently created the video installation *Across the Burning Track*, commissioned for the 11th Shanghai Biennale, 2016.

SUBHAJIT CHATTERJEE obtained his postgraduate degree in Film Studies from Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and completed Doctoral Research at the Centre for the Study of Culture and Society, Bangalore. He is currently Assistant Professor, Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University. His research interests include film historiography, melodrama and popular cinema, exploitation and extreme film genres. Chatterjee has published essays in the *Journal of the Moving Image*, *South Asian Journal*, *Marg* and *Positions: Asia Critique*.

TEJASWINI GANTI is Associate Professor, Anthropology, and core faculty in the Program in Culture and Media, New York University. She has been conducting research on the social world and filmmaking practices of the Hindi film industry since 1996. She is the author of *Producing Bollywood: Inside the Contemporary Hindi Film Industry* (Duke University Press, 2012), and *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema* (Routledge, 2004; 2nd edition, 2013). Ganti is currently writing a book about the politics of language and translation in Mumbai's media industries.

PUJITA GUHA is a Film and Media PhD student, and Chancellor's Fellow at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her doctoral research probes the entanglement of environmental media, forest histories, and Southeast and South Asian cinema, media and culture. With Abhijan Toto, she runs a curatorial project called the Forest Curriculum that looks at Southeast and South Asian cosmologies, indigenous thought, art, activism and environmental concerns of the region. Guha has published in *Popular Cinema in Bengal*, *Stardom in Southeast Asia*, *Nang,* among others.

JENSON JOSEPH is Alexander von Humboldt Research Fellow, Institute for Asian and African Studies (IAAW), Humboldt University, Berlin. Jenson holds a PhD in Communication from the University of Hyderabad (2013). Chapters from his PhD dissertation titled 'Industry, Aesthetics, Spectatorial Subjectivities: A Study on Malayalam Cinema of the 1950s' have appeared in journals such as *BioScope*, *positions: asia critique* and *Tapasam*. Jenson was a post-doctoral fellow at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai (2016–2017).

MOHAMED SHAFEEQ KARINKURAYIL teaches at Manipal Centre for Humanities, Manipal Academy of Higher Education (MAHE), Karnataka. His research interests include visual cultures, film studies, migration studies and memory studies. Karinkurayil received his PhD in Cultural Studies from the English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad.

PUNEET KRISHNA, an engineer and MBA by education, debuted as the co-writer and lyricist of the film *Bangistan*, produced by Excel Entertainment. He also wrote songs for the film *3 Storeys*, produced under the same banner. He was an integral part of the Writers' Room

of Amazon Prime Video's first Indian original, *Inside Edge*. Krishna was also the creator, showrunner and lead writer of the popular crime drama series *Mirzapur*, produced by Excel Entertainment for Amazon Prime Video.

DARSHANA SREEDHAR MINI is Assistant Professor, Department of Communication Arts, University of Wisconsin-Madison. Supported by the Social Science Research Council and American Institute of Indian Studies, her work explores precarious media formations, such as low-budget films produced in Kerala, mapping their transnational journeys. Her research interests broadly include Global Media Cultures, Transnational Cinemas and Migration, South Asian Cinema and Feminist Media. Her work has been published in *Feminist Media Histories*, *Bioscope: South Asian Screen Studies*, *International Journal for Digital Television*, among others.

NAVANEETHA MOKKIL teaches at the Centre for Women's Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University. Her research and teaching are in the areas of feminist theory and methodology, literary and visual cultures, and public formations of sexuality in India. She is the author of *Unruly Figures: Queerness, Sex Work and the Politics of Sexuality in Kerala* (2019). Mokkil is co-editor of *Thinking Women: A Feminist Reader* (2019).

MADHUJA MUKHERJEE is Professor of Film Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her research extends into art-practice and filmmaking. It involves subjects of film industry and historiography (*New Theatres Ltd.: The Emblem of Art; The Picture of Success* [2009]); sound cultures (*Aural Films, Oral Cultures* [2012]), and questions of women, work and writing (*Voices of the Talking Stars* [2017]). Recently, she has co-edited two volumes: *Popular Cinema in Bengal* (2020) and *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India* (2021). Mukherjee is the artistic director of TENT Biennale, Kolkata.

RAGHAV NANDURI holds a BA in Economics from Azim Premji University, Bengaluru, in 2020. While he was a student at the university, he worked as a researcher in two projects on the transformation of the film industry. He co-authored an essay published in *BioScope: South Asian Screen Studies*. Nanduri is a film buff and an aspiring filmmaker.

M. MADHAVA PRASAD is Professor, Cultural Studies, English and Foreign Languages University (EFLU), Hyderabad. He is the author of *Ideology of the Hindi Film: A Historical Construction* (1998), *Cine-politics: Film Stars and Political Existence in South India* (2014), including essays on cinema, popular culture, literature and literary theory, and socio-political issues such as caste and reservations and political representation. Prasad is currently engaged in research in the areas of language politics, the history of representation in India, and contemporary new cinema.

RATHEESH RADHAKRISHNAN teaches literature and film at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology, Mumbai.

ASHISH RAJADHYAKSHA is a film historian, and an occasional art curator. He is the author of *Ritwik Ghatak: A Return to the Epic* (1982), *Indian Cinema in the Time of Celluloid: From Bollywood to the Emergency* (2009) and *The Last Cultural Mile: An Inquiry into Technology and Governance in India* (2011). Rajadhyaksha is editor of *Encyclopaedia of Indian Cinema* (with Paul Willemen) (1994/1999), and the book of Kumar Shahani's writings, *The Shock of Desire and Other Essays* (2015).

RASHMI SAWHNEY is Associate Professor, Film and Cultural Studies, Christ University, Bangalore. She writes academic and non-academic articles, curates, dabbles in video art, and writes a fortnightly film column in Marathi in *Prabuddha Bharat*, a publication started by Babasaheb Ambedkar.

GURMMEET SINGH started as a trained editor in television and films, and moved on to assisting industry stalwarts Farhan Akhtar, Ashutosh Gowariker, Ram Madhvani, Shashanka Ghosh, among others. Singh graduated to directing in 2009 and has successfully directed a spectrum of projects across various mediums including film, television, commercials and music videos. One of the pioneers in OTT content, with two globally acclaimed shows—*Inside Edge* and *Mirzapur*—Singh's next directorial venture is the film *Phone Bhoot*.

S. V. SRINIVAS is a professor at the School of Arts and Sciences, Azim Premji University, Bengaluru. His books *Megastar* (OUP,

2009) and *Politics as Performance* (Permanent Black, 2013) trace the simultaneous emergence of the film industries, star-politicians and fandoms in south India. He is the co-editor (with Adrian Athique and Vibodh Parthasarathi) of the two-volume collection of essays titled *The Indian Media Economy* (OUP, 2018). Srinivas' current research focuses on changing spectatorial practices and their implications for mass mobilisations.

SAMHITA SUNYA is Assistant Professor, Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Virginia. She is the author of *Sirens of Modernity: World Cinema Via Bombay* (forthcoming, University of California Press), and guest co-editor of a 2020 special issue of *Film History*. Sunya is working on a second book-length manuscript titled 'Agents on Location', which explores South–South histories of location shooting and espionage genres, as intertwined with informal and clandestine practices of film distribution.

ISHITA TIWARY is Assistant Professor, Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema, Concordia University, Montreal. Tiwary's research interests lie at the intersection of video cultures, aesthetics and media infrastructures.

◆